PETER KREEFT

Socrates' Children

The 100 Greatest Philosophers

Volume I: Ancient Philosophers

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Socrates' Children Ancient

The 100 Greatest Philosophers

Volume I: Ancient Philosophers

Peter Kreeft

St. Augustine's Press
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to William Harry Jellema,
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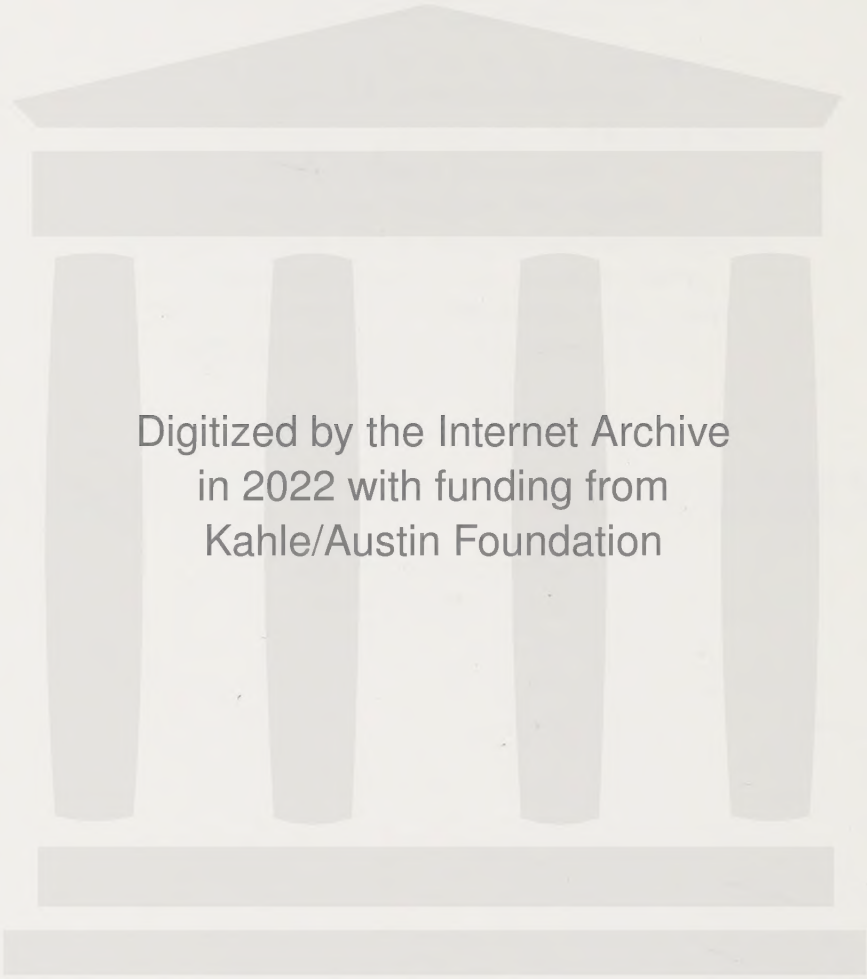
who taught me how to philosophize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* indicates important philosophers
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A Salesman's-Pitch Introduction to This Book

Why the History of Philosophy Is the Best Introduction to Philosophy

There are two ways to teach and learn philosophy: the usual way and the best way. The usual way is called "analytic philosophy." This means arguing about the questions philosophers ask, using modern symbolic logic. There's certainly nothing wrong with that, but it does not appeal to most people. It's abstract. Ordinary people, as distinct from philosophers, don't really care about a technical logical proof that there is a self-referential inconsistency in the hypothesis that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter, or a ten-step proof that there is in principle no possible proof that you really have a body. (Yes, those are the kind of questions "analytic philosophers" actually write about.

There have been two very different conceptions of philosophy in the English speaking world for the last century. Traditionally, philosophy was about life, and it was something to be lived. Philosophers were looked up to as "wise men" rather than "wise guys." Philosophical reason was something computers simply did not have. But ever since (1) Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*, in 1910, 1912, and 1913, (2) Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, in 1921, and (3) Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic,* in 1936, there has been a new conception of the task of the philosopher: (a) not to tell us what is, but to analyze the language of those who do; and (b) in so doing to imitate scientific and mathematical thinking, which is "digital," rather than ordinary language, which is "analog"; and, to that end, to use symbolic, or mathematical, logic (basically, computer logic) rather than traditional Aristotelian ordinary-language logic.

Indeed, this has been the "main line" conception of philosophy in English-speaking cultures for over half a century. It has moved far beyond the early, narrow, and dogmatic claims for it, such as Ayer's, but its *style* of philosophical writing is still easily identifiable: you can spot an "analytic philosopher" by reading just one paragraph.

Such philosophers are useful as vacuum cleaners and garbage collectors are useful, to identify and dispose of waste. They clean well. But they do not cook very tasty or interesting meals. I think large philosophy departments should have at least one and at most two of them, as restaurants should have cleaning crews.

The best way to teach philosophy is by a story: the dramatic story of the history of philosophy, the narrative of "the great conversation" which you find in "the great books." It's politically incorrect to say it, but there is indeed a canon or list of "great books." That's why Plato and Shakespeare never die. Of course the canon is arguable and not sacrosanct. It's only human. It's not a canon of sacred scriptures.

The most effective way to teach *anything* is by a story, a narrative. All the great teachers used stories, parables, examples, analogies, illustrations. It's really very easy to get ordinary human beings interested in philosophy: just put the picture back into the frame; put the abstract, difficult questions that philosophers ask back into the context of history, where they actually came from: the real, lived human conversations and arguments that passionately divided real individuals, like Socrates and the Sophists, and whole cultures like ancient Rome and medieval Christendom and modern secular scientific democracies.

The primary reason why the history of philosophy works better than analytic philosophy, the primary reason why most students love it and often become philosophers and philosophy teachers through it, is embarrassingly simple: because the great masters of the past are more *interesting* than present day philosophers.

If we are too arrogant to admit that, we judge the past by the standards of the present; the opposite idea hardly ever even occurs to us. So we study the past not to learn from them but to teach them, to show how primitive they were compared to ourselves. I refute this "chronological snobbery" by three simple words: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle.

The sciences progress almost automatically; the humanities do not. Philosophy is one of the humanities, not one of the sciences.

Our ancestors made mistakes, just as we do, but different ones. Theirs are now usually obvious to us; our own are not, and therefore are much more harmful. They are the glasses through which we look rather than the things we look at. "To see ourselves as others see us" is to broaden our mind. We wonder how we will we appear to our remote descendants, but we cannot know. We cannot read the books that haven't been written yet. But we can know how we would look to our remote ancestors. For we can read their books.

The only alternative to listening to the many who have already spoken, and died, is listening to the few who are now alive and speaking: ourselves. The first, often called "tradition," is more democratic. It is what Chesterton called "the democracy of the dead": extending the vote to those who otherwise would be disqualified not by accident of birth but by accident of death.

A scientist studies the history of science as a series of instructive errors and gradual progress to enlightenment. And this is right, in science, because in science the past really is inferior to the present, and has been proved to be that. But it is not right to do this in philosophy because philosophy is not science, and past philosophers have *not* been proved to be inferior to present ones. Here is a proof of that fact—or, rather, of the fact that at least unconsciously *we believe that* they were wiser than we are, and not vice versa: We do not speak of "modern wisdom" but of "ancient wisdom." The noun we spontaneously connect with "modern" is not "wisdom" but "knowledge." Knowledge is incremental, like a stairway: it naturally progresses. Wisdom is not. And philosophy is the search for wisdom.

The best way to learn philosophy, then, is through its history. This is true even if

your eventual goal is to be an "analytic philosopher" and analyze the issues logically and not historically (which is a perfectly legitimate and necessary job). For you simply can't find any better teachers to begin with than the ancients, especially Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, even if you want to move beyond them.

The history of philosophy is not dead facts but living examples. It is not to be studied simply for its own sake. We should apprentice ourselves to the great minds of the past for our sakes, not for theirs; for the sake of the present and the future, not the past.

I have tried just about every possible way to introduce philosophy to beginners (and some impossible ways too), and by far the most effective one I have ever found is the "great books," beginning with the dialogs of Plato.

If Plato was the first great philosophical *writer*, Socrates, his teacher, was the first great *philosopher*. Plato was to Socrates what Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul were to Jesus. (Socrates, like Jesus and Buddha, wrote nothing. He was too busy *doing* it to publish it.) And Aristotle, Plato's prime pupil, is to the West what Confucius is to China: the archetype of common sense, the one whom subsequent thinkers either build on as a primary foundation or attack as a primary opponent.

So here is the story of philosophy. It's the story of a long, long series of arguments in a very large and dysfunctional family, and Socrates is its main patriarch, so I've called it "Socrates' Children."

Something about Passion

Most philosophy textbooks aren't fully human because they deliberately cut out all emotions, such as enthusiasm and wonder—even though Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all said that wonder was the origin of philosophy! Most textbook authors try to imitate computers. I gladly announce that I am not a computer. I am a person, with both rational and irrational passions, and feelings. One of these is the passion for philosophy, and the conviction that philosophy should be exciting—rather, that it *is* exciting, and therefore should be taught that way. I am convinced that reason and passion, head and heart, are both very, very valuable and ought to be allies, not enemies.

The purpose of an introduction to philosophy is to intro-duce philo-sophy, that is, to lead-into (the literal meaning of "introduction") the-love-of-wisdom (the literal meaning of "philosophy"). To-lead-*into*, not merely to-see-and-analyze-from-afar. To be a door, not a microscope. And to lead the reader into the-love-of-wisdom, not the-cultivation-of-cleverness.

Love is a passion. Without blood from the heart, the brain does not work well. Without the will to understand, we do not understand. The brain is not merely a computer; it is a *human* brain. My ambition in this book is not just to inform and to summarize historical facts. I want to be your matchmaker. Jack and Jill, come up the hill and meet Plato. Fall in love with him. Struggle, be puzzled, get angry, fight your way out of the Cave. This book is not just *data,* this is drama.

Why This Book?

I decided to write this book when the umpteenth person asked me the following question: "Could you recommend just one book that covers the whole history of philosophy that beginners can understand and even get excited about?"

Since I could not answer that question in words, I decided to try to answer it in deeds. I write the books I want to read when nobody else will write them. Sometimes you have to write a book first in order to get the satisfaction of reading it.

Thirty two features make this book distinctive.

(1) **It is "existential," practical, personal**. Philosophy is about *human* life and thought, so I concentrated on the ideas that *make a difference* to our experience, to our lives. That is William James' "pragmatic criterion of truth." (I think he really meant 'meaning' rather than 'truth.') His point is that if you can't specify *what difference it makes* if you believe or disbelieve an idea, then that idea is neither true nor false in any humanly significant sense.

(2) **It is selective.** It doesn't try to cover too much. For an "introduction" means, literally, a "leading-into" rather than a summary or survey. It is not the last word but a first word, a beginning; for it is for beginners. Little philosophers get only a page or two, great philosophers get only a dozen, medium sized philosophers get between 3 and 6.

(3) **It concentrates on "the Big Ideas."** (In fact, I thought of entitling it "What's the Big Idea?") This involves minimizing or omitting many "smaller" ideas. I think it is true of ideas, as of friends, that you can have too many of them. Better to have a few that are deeply understood and cherished than to have many that are not.

This book includes only what most students will find valuable. They will find valuable only what they remember years later. They will remember years later only those ideas that make a difference to their lives. And that's usually one Big Idea from each philosopher.

(4) **It covers 100 philosophers.** I chose them by two standards: (a) intrinsic excellence, wisdom, and importance, and (b) extrinsic historical influence and fame.

(5) **It gives much more space to the 'big nine': Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel.** These are the most influential philosophers of all time.

(6) **It presents the history of philosophy as a story, a "great conversation."** A book about the history of philosophy is not about history but about philosophy; yet philosophers can be understood best historically: as partners in a dialog with other philosophers. The

whole history of Western philosophy is a very long and complex Socratic dialog. The dialog is exciting, for thought-revolutions are more important than political revolutions, and battles between ideas are more intriguing than battles between armies.

(7) On the other hand, **its point of view is not historical relativism.** I do not try to explain away any philosophers by reducing them to creatures of their times, as Marxists and Hegelians do. Though humans are rooted in *humus* (earth) like trees, yet like trees we also reach into the sky. Historians read the *Times* but philosophers try to read the eternities.

(8) **It is for beginners, not scholars.** It is not "scholarly" in style. It does not break new ground in content. It does not push any new philosophical theory.

(9) **It is not "dumbed down"** even though it is for beginners, for it is for intelligent beginners, not dumb beginners. (It is also appropriate for intelligent high school seniors and for graduate students in other departments than philosophy.)

(10) **It is for college courses** in the history of philosophy. **But it is also a "do-it-yourself" book** which does not require a teacher to interpret it.

(11) **Its point of view is traditional rather than fashionable.** It neither assumes nor tries to prove any one particular philosophical position. Though I try to be fair to all philosophers and get "into their heads" of each, I confess at the outset **a sympathy for common sense**. In philosophical terms, this usually (but not always) means, in one word, Aristotle rather than, e.g., Nietzsche, Marx, or Derrida.

(12) **It tries to be both clear and profound, both logical and existential.** For two or three generations philosophers have been divided into two camps separated by these two ideals. English speaking "analytic" philosophers have sought maximum clarity and logic, while Continental philosophers have sought a more "synthetic" "big picture" that is more profound and existential. The result is that the former sound like chirping birds while the latter sound like muttering witch doctors. I try to bridge this gap by going back to Socrates, who demanded both clarity and profundity. Many other philosophers today are also trying to bridge that gap by dialoging with each other across the Channel.

(13) Like Socrates, it takes logic seriously. Therefore **it summarizes not just conclusions but arguments**, and evaluates them logically. But it uses ordinary-language logic, common-sense logic, Socratic logic, rather than the artificial language of modern mathematical, symbolic logic.

(14) **It uses three kinds of logic**, as Socrates did:

It uses *inductive* logic by grounding and testing its abstract and general ideas in concrete and particular instances.

It uses *deductive* logic in tracing practices back to their principles and principles back to their premises, and in following premises, principles, and practices out to their logical conclusions.

And it uses *seductive* logic as a woman would seduce a man by her beauty. For philosophy can be very beautiful.

(15) Many of the questions philosophers ask are also questions religion claims to answer, though the methods of these two enterprises are fundamentally different: philosophy uses human reason alone while religion relies on faith in something that is more than human. Therefore this book **naturally interfaces with religion** in its questions, but not in its methods. Neither religious belief nor unbelief is either presupposed or aimed at.

(16) **It is so unfashionable as to seek *truth*, of all things!** Much of contemporary philosophy looks like intellectual masturbation. But real philosophy ("the love of wisdom") seeks the fruit of truth, not just fun, play, or display of cleverness. It is not mentally contraceptive.

(17) **It emphasizes the classical philosophers,** for two reasons.

(1) We don't yet know which contemporary philosophers will be acknowledged as great and which will be forgotten. It takes time for history, like a sieve, to sort out the big and little stones. Every era makes mistakes about itself. "Our era is the only one that doesn't" is perhaps the stupidest mistake of all.

(2) The questions contemporary philosophers typically ask are not the questions real people ask. They are questions like whether we can prove that we're not just brains in vats being hypnotized into seeing a world that isn't there. How many people do you know who worry about that question? I suspect even philosophers don't really worry about it if they're sane; they just pretend to. (In other words, they pretend to be insane.) Real people ask questions like: What are we? What should we be? Why were we born? Why must we suffer? Why must we die? Why do we kill? How should we live? Is there a God? An afterlife? Where does morality come from? What is the greatest good? How do you know?

(18) **It is full of surprises.** It emphasizes things readers probably do *not* already know, understand, or believe. It does not patronizingly pass off clichés as profundities. It emphasizes wonder, since "philosophy begins in wonder."

This does not contradict its preference for common sense (point 7 above), for common sense, when explored, turns out to be more wonderful than any cleverly invented ideologies. For real life is much more fantastic than any fantasy; for fantasy only imitates life, while life imitates nothing. (You can learn this, and similar things, from the most maverick pick among my 100 philosophers, G.K. Chesterton.)

(19) **It dares to be funny.** It includes humor whenever relevant, because reality does. Reality is in fact amazingly funny.

(20) **It includes visual aids** because we both learn and remember more effectively with our eyes than with our ears.

The treatment of each of the 100 philosophers usually contains **12 parts**, as follows:

(21) A photo, statue, or **portrait** of the philosopher

(22) A brief **bio**, including **the seven W's**:
- (a) "**Who**": his complete name
- (b) "**Where**": his place of birth and nationality
- (c) "**When**": his birth and death
- (d) "**What**": his job or career
- (e) "**Whimsy**": unusual, dramatic or humorous facts or legends about him
- (f) "**Which**" was his most famous book
- (g) "**Why**" he asked the questions he did, which is point (23) below:

Obviously, some philosophers' lives are much more interesting than others. Some philosophers are almost all life and hardly any theory (e.g. Diogenes the Cynic); others are almost all theory and almost no life (e.g. Hegel).

(23) His **historical situation** and problem, his dialog with previous philosophers

(24) His **Big Idea** or central insight or most important teaching

(25) His most **famous quotation(s)** (You will find the following piece of advice unusual but practical, I think. When you come to a quotation from a philosopher in this book, long or short, read it *aloud.* This helps you to remember and also to more deeply understand it, because this not only reinforces one sense [seeing] with another [hearing] but also brings into play your unconscious mind, your intuition and feelings.)

(26) A **diagram** or sketch whenever possible, translating the abstract idea into a visual image

(27) The **practical difference** the idea makes
- (a) to life—to *your* life;
- (b) to thought (the idea's logical implications); and
- (c) to history (to subsequent thinkers)

(28) The essential **argument(s) for** this idea

(29) The essential **argument(s) against** it

(30) **Satellite ideas**, if any

(31) Short recommended **bibliography**, both primary and secondary sources, but only when readable and helpful

(32) **Probable reading experience;** hints to make him come clear and alive.

A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy

The best introduction to philosophy is the history of philosophy. The best answer to the question "What is philosophy?" is not an ideal definition of it but real examples of it. If you want to know what philosophy is, read philosophers.

Start with Plato. Whitehead famously summarized the whole history of Western philosophy as "**footnotes to Plato**." (I thought of using that for the title of this book.). Plato is the first philosopher from whom we have whole books. He is the first great philosophical writer, *and the last.* For no philosopher has ever improved on his style.

Philosophy, according to its three greatest inventors, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, begins in wonder and ends in wisdom. It is, literally "the love (*philia,* friendship) of wisdom (*sophia).*"

"Wonder" means three things:

(a) It starts with *surprise* (e.g. "What a wonder!—that despite my deepest desire to live, I must die!"),

(b) It leads to *questioning* (e.g. "I wonder *why* I must die."),

(c) It ends with deepened *appreciation* (e.g. "How wonderful that my life, like a picture, has a frame, a limit! How wonderful that what I so deeply fear—death—I also deeply need!").

The first kind of wonder (surprise) leads to the second (questioning). We question only what we find remarkable. And the second kind of wonder (questioning), when successful, leads to the third kind (appreciation, contemplative wonder): we contemplate, and appreciate, and intellectually "eat," the truths we discover through questioning and investigating and reasoning.

What do philosophers ask questions about? These are the *divisions* of philosophy. They include 4 main parts:

(1) *metaphysics*, which is the study of the truths, laws, or principles that apply to all reality, not just physics but "beyond" (*meta)* those limits, though including them

(2) *philosophical anthropology*, or philosophical psychology, which is the philosophical study of human nature, or the self

(3) *epistemology*, which is the study of knowing and how we know; this can include logic and methodology

(4) *ethics*, which is the study of what we ought to do and be

In other words,

(1) What is real?

(2) What am I?

(3) How can I know?
(4) What should I do?
But philosophers also apply philosophy to many other areas, such as
(5) social and political philosophy
(6) philosophy of religion
(7) philosophy of education
(8) philosophy of art, or aesthetics
(9) philosophy of science
Etc. We can philosophize about anything: sexuality, sports, humor, even soup. E.g. I wrote a philosophy of surfing entitled *I Surf, Therefore I Am*

Why is philosophy important?

(1) Because it is distinctively human. Animals do not philosophize because they know too little, and God, gods, or angels do not philosophize because they know too much. To be human is to philosophize, for to be human is to wonder.

(2) Because it makes a difference to everything. Sometimes the difference is a matter of life or death. Wars are fought for philosophical reasons. The Civil War was fought over the rightness or wrongness of slavery. World War II was fought over Fascism, which was a philosophy. The Cold War was fought over a philosophy: Marxism, or Communism. The present "culture wars" are being fought throughout Western civilization over many related philosophical issues: religion, human nature, "natural laws," human sexuality, the meaning of marriage and family, whether human lives have absolute or relative value, just and unjust wars, and the role of the State in human life.

For a short but dramatic introduction to philosophy, I recommend you read four of the dialogs of Plato that center around the death of Socrates, the first great philosopher: *Euthyphro*, *Crito*," *Apology*, and *Phaedo*. Or—a very distant second best—read my *Philosophy 101 by Socrates: An Introduction to Philosophy via the "Apology" of Plato.*

The best way to learn philosophy is not through books *about* the philosophers—books like this one—but from the books written *by* the philosophers. Fortunately, most great philosophers wrote short, simpler books as well as long, harder ones; and almost always it was the shorter ones that became classics. For instance;

Philosopher	easy, short book	hard, long book
Plato	*Apology*	*Republic*
Augustine	*Confessions*	*City of God*
Boethius	*The Consolation of Philosophy*	*On the Trinity*
Anselm	*Proslogium*	*Monologium*
Bonaventure	*Itinerary of the Mind to God*	*many*
Machiavelli	*The Prince*	*Discourses*
Pascal	*Pensées*	*Provincial Letters*

Descartes	*Discourse on Method*	*Meditations*
Leibnitz	*Monadology*	(many)
Berkeley	*Three Dialogs Hylas & Philonous*	(many)
Hume	*Enquiry on Human Understanding*	*Treatise on Human Nature*
Kant	*Grounding of Metaphysic of Morals*	*Critique of Practical Reason*
Heidegger	*Discourse on Thinking*	*Being and Time*
Sartre	*Existentialism & Human Emotions*	*Being & Nothingness*
Marx	*Communist Manifesto*	*Capital*
Kierkegaard	*Philosophical Fragments*	*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*
Marcel	*The Philosophy of Existentialism*	*The Mystery of Being*

Unfortunately, four of the most important philosophers—Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel, and Nietzsche—never wrote a short, clear and simple book (though Aristotle wrote a long and simple one, the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Nietzsche wrote a few short but not simple ones, and Aquinas wrote a very long and clear but not simple one, the *Summa Theologiae).*

Philosophy and Religion

Philosophy is not religion and religion is not philosophy.

All religions, however diverse their content, originate in faith rather than pure reason, and their ultimate appeal is to divine authority, the authority of divinely revealed scriptures (e.g. Bible, Qur'an), or institutions (e.g. the Catholic Church), or mystical experiences (e.g. Buddhist "Nirvana").

Philosophy, classically conceived, originates in and is justified by appeal to reason. Medieval philosophers often used philosophical reason to justify religious faith (e.g. rational proofs for the existence of God). Ironically, modern philosophers, in reaction against medieval philosophy, often begin by questioning the validity of faith and end by questioning the validity of reason and substituting ideology, feeling, or will (e.g. Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dewey, Derrida). Philosophers who make this move usually construe "reason" much more narrowly than classical (premodern) philosophers did. They think of "reason" as *scientific* reasoning. If medieval philosophy is in bed with religion, modern philosophy is in bed with science.

The greatest difference between philosophers and other human beings is probably not philosophy but religion. For everyone has a philosophy, whether well thought out or not, but not everyone believes in a religion. According to the polls, only 5–10% of Americans identify themselves as atheists, but 75% of philosophers do. That fact explains why

most histories of philosophy do not understand religious philosophies very well. Religion, like sex, humor, and music, is something one understands from within much better than from without. Whenever I have my class argue about religion, I make the believers argue for atheism and the doubters, agnostics, and atheists argue for faith, and the result is always the same: the pretend atheists do a far better job than the pretend believers. Then we argue about whether this was because only the believers understood both sides or whether it was because the pretend believers had to argue for unarguable myths and superstitions.

This book is not about religion but about philosophy, but one of the primary questions of philosophy is whether something like God exists; for this idea makes more of a difference to everything else, both in life and in philosophy, than just about any other idea. It makes a difference to personal identity, death, morality, and "the meaning of life." The God-idea is almost certainly either the most important error and illusion or the most important truth in the history of human thought. So a book on philosophy cannot ignore the idea. Most great philosophers did not. However, it treats the idea philosophically (by reason) rather than religiously (by faith). It is no part of this book either to presuppose or to try to prove or disprove religious faith, either overtly or as a "hidden agenda." I have tried to be equally fair to all points of view, including nihilism, skepticism, Marxism, and even Deconstructionism, which I cannot help suspecting is not even serious but just "jerking our chain."

A Personal Bibliography

Please note: this is merely "*a* bibliography," one among many possible lists of recommended further reading, of other books I have written about these philosophers.

The very best books to read are, of course, the books of the great philosophers themselves, or the "great books." Why anyone would oppose "great books" blows my mind. Do they prefer tiny books, shallow books, or stupid books?

Most of the "great books" in the history of philosophy are surprisingly short and surprisingly clear, for they were written for intelligent, literate ordinary people, not for other philosophes. (This becomes increasingly rare as we approach the present time.) Seventeen of these classics are listed in the previous section, "A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy."

(1) Solomon: *Three Philosophies of Life* (Ignatius Press)
(2) Shankara: *Philosophy of Religion* (taped lectures, Recorded Books),
(3) Buddha, *op. cit.*
(4) Confucius, *op. cit.*
(5) Lao Tzu, *op. cit.*
(6) Presocratics, Greeks, and Moderns: *The Journey* (InterVarsity Press)
(7) Socrates: *Philosophy 101 by Socrates: an Introduction to Philosophy via Plato's "Apology"* (St. Augustine's Press)
(8) Plato: *The Platonic Tradition* (St. Augustine's Press)
(9) Plato: *Socrates' Student* (an introduction to Plato's *Republic*) (St. Augustine's Press)
(10) Aristotelian logic: *Socratic Logic* (St. Augustine's Press)
(11) Jesus: *The Philosophy of Jesus* (St. Augustine's Press)
(12) Jesus: *Socrates Meets Jesus* (InterVarsity Press)
(13) Jesus: *Jesus Shock* (St. Augustine's Press)
(14) Muhammad: *Between Allah and Jesus* (InterVarsity Press)
(15) Augustine: *I Burned for Your Peace* (Ignatius Press)
(16) Aquinas: *Summa of the Summa* (Ignatius Press)
(17) Aquinas, *A Shorter Summa* (Ignatius Press)
(18) Aquinas, an introduction (Recorded Books)
(19) Aquinas, *Practical Theology (Ignatius Press)*
(20) Machiavelli: *Socrates Meets Machivevlli* (St. Augustine's Press)
(21) Pascal: *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's "Pensees"* (Ignatius Press)
(22) Descartes: *Socrates Meets Descartes* (St. Augustine's Press)
(23) Hume: *Socrates Meets Hume* (St. Augustine's Press)

(24) Kant: *Socrates Meets Kant* (St. Augustine's Press)
(25) Marx: *Socrates Meets Marx* (St. Augustine's Press)
(26) Kierkegaard: *Socrates Meets Kierkegaard* (St. Augustine's Press)
(27) Freud: *Socrates Meets Freud* (St. Augustine's Press)
(28) Sartre: *Socrates Meets Sartre* (St. Augustine's Press)
(29) Modern philosophers argued with: *Summa Philosophica* (St. Augustine's Press)
(30) A history of ethics "What Would Socrates Do?" (Recorded Books)

A Few Recommended Histories of Philosophy

Here are a selected few histories of philosophy which do not duplicate mine but have somewhat different ends.

(1) Frederick Copleston, S.J. has written the most clear and complete multi-volume history of Western philosophy available, with increasing detail and attention as it gets more and more contemporary. It is not exciting or dramatic or "existential" but it is very logical and helpful.

(2) Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* is charmingly and engagingly written, though very selective and very personally "angled."

(3) Bertrand Russell, a major philosopher himself, has written a very intelligent, very witty, history of Western philosophy from the viewpoint of a modern, "Enlightenment" atheist. Don't expect fair and equal treatment of both sides.

(4) Francis Parker's one-volume history of philosophy up to Hegel, *The Story of Western Philosophy,* centers on the theme of the one and the many.

(5) Mortimer Adler's *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* is not a complete history but a diagnostic treatment of key errors in modern philosophy.

(6) Etienne Gilson's *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* does the same.

(7) William Barrett's *Irrational Man,* though only an introduction to existentialism, has some very powerfully written and engaging historical chapter s on pre-existentialist philosophy from the existentialist viewpoint, as well as the best available one-chapter summaries of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. His *The Illusion of Technique* thoughtfully compares James, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger.

Most philosophy texts today are anthologies of recent *articles* written by recent philosophers about recent systematic issues. Most of these are thin, dry, technical, dull, and lacking in "existential" bite, though all of them are very intelligent. They have their place. But usually, only Math and Science students, not English or History students, like them.

The very short "selected bibliographies" at the end of some chapters (only important ones) are for beginners, not scholars. They are chosen for readability, for their power to interest and move the reader.

Introduction to Ancient Philosophy

Philosophy, unlike the human body, does not decline, grow old, and die. In fact, as Gilson said, "philosophy buries its undertakers" (of whom there have been many); as Heidegger said, "what is great can only begin great." Thus the ancient (pre-medieval) era is the most important era of all for human culture, including philosophy, because it is the foundation for all that follows. As the poet says, "the child is the father of the man."

In one sense philosophy begins as soon as human kind begins; for asking, at some level, however inarticulate and subconscious, the great philosophical questions, about self, world, God, life, death, good, evil, truth, falsehood, matter and mind is as quintessentially human as making moral choices, falling in love, appreciating beauty, or inventing artifacts.

In another sense, philosophy begins only when this innate curiosity is communicated in words, and more especially in lasting writing; and this happened, to some extent, in every culture that had writing, probably as early as the third millennium B.C. in India and Egypt. We explore this period very briefly in the section on "the sages."

In a third and narrower sense, philosophy began in Greece in the fifth century B.C. above all with one of the most remarkable, distinctive, and influential men who ever lived, Socrates. Socrates was the first man who clearly understood the nature, the rules, and the importance of rational argument. Socrates wrote nothing, but his student and disciple Plato wrote almost everything worth saying about philosophy. Emerson said simply that "Plato is philosophy and philosophy is Plato," and Whitehead said that the best summary of the history of Western philosophy is that it is "footnotes to Plato."

Here are the footnotes.

Introduction to the Sages

In one sense "sages" are philosophers; in another sense they are not.

They are included in this book because they are philosophers in the sense that they are lovers and teachers of wisdom. Wisdom is the knowledge of

(a) not just any reality but of *ultimate reality*, whatever that may be;

(b) not just any explanations and causes but of *first or ultimate causes*; and

(c) not just facts but of *values*, of the good.

But the sages are *not* philosophers in another sense: the way they reached their wisdom and the way they taught it was not primarily through logical reasoning, but through intuition, immediate understanding, mystical experience, religious experience, or faith in divine revelation.

The sages asked many of the great philosophical questions: What is the unity of all things? What is our place in this grand scheme of things? How should we live? How can we become happy? What is evil and what should we do about it? But they explored these questions through unusual mental and spiritual gifts, not through common reason, as the philosophers did.

A word about one of the most crucial and most easily misunderstood terms in philosophy. In its ancient and traditional sense, "reason" means not only (1) the calculative *reasoning* or arguing, which computers can do much better than we can, but also (2) the discriminating *judgment* about which statements are true and which are false and (3) the intellectual *understanding* of concepts, which is expressed in definitions. Reasoning moves from one judgment, as a premise to another as a conclusion; and a judgment judges that one concept, as predicate, is true of another, as subject. These (understanding, judging, and reasoning) are the traditionally-distinguished "three acts of the mind" in Aristotelian logic.

Philosophy's method is to appeal to reason. And since reason is common to all, and since philosophers arrived at their conclusions by reason, we can evaluate them by the same power: reason. But since sages appeal to other powers that are *not* common to all, their teaching is usually passed down by the authority of tradition rather than reason alone. In fact, some (e.g. Shankara, Buddha, and Lao Tzu) see ordinary reason as a major *obstacle* to wisdom, and they teach a radical transformation of human consciousness itself.

1. Solomon (1011–931 B.C.)

Solomon, David's son and Israel's second king, was reputed to be the wisest man in the world. (I Kings 3:12) Even today "the wisdom of Solomon" is a platitude of profound praise.

Ancient Jewish tradition credits Solomon with writing three books in the Hebrew Bible: the idealistic love lyrics of the *Song of Songs* in his youth, the practical *Proverbs* in middle age, and the world-weary and cynical *Ecclesiastes* in old age. Most Biblical scholars believe that *Song of Songs* and *Ecclesiastes* were both written long after Solomon's death; the authors used his name instead of their own out of respect for their revered teacher and archetype, as if I would write this book under the pseudonym "Socrates."

But we will explore "the philosophy of Solomon" through *Ecclesiastes* since *Ecclesiastes* is truly a work of *philosophy* and contains *arguments*, while *Proverbs* is just *proverbs* and *Song of Songs* just *songs*. (I should not have said "*just*"—both proverbs and songs are of very great value. No society can be wise and happy without them.)

Ecclesiastes is a book of one Big Idea, stated at the beginning and at the end, and every verse in the book is part of the argument for this one idea. The Big Idea is the author's answer to the most obvious, and obviously important, philosophical question of all: What is the meaning (end, purpose) of life?

And his answer is: Nothing. His is a nihilist ("nothing-ist"). "All is vanity." All attempts at finding the meaning and purpose of human life are in vain. The word translated "vanity" means literally "chasing after the wind."

The essential argument of the whole book can be summarized in a single syllogism:

All "toil" is "under the sun."
And all that is "under the sun" is "vanity."
Therefore all "toil" is "vanity."

By "toil" he means "attempts at meaning, ways of living, lifestyles." By "under the sun" he means "in the world as it appears to everyone's ordinary observation." By "vanity" he means "having no ultimate purpose, point, or fulfillment."

Among the ways of life or lifestyles tested by the Solomonic author are the pursuit of (1) wisdom (1:13–17), (2) pleasure (2:1–2), (3) riches (2:4–8), (4) fame and honor (6:1–6; 9:13–15), and (5) religious piety (5:1–7).

Among the reasons why all that is "under the sun" is "vanity" are (1) the fact that it all ends in death (3:19–21; 12:2–8); (2) nature's indifference to justice (2:14–23;

7:15–17; 8:14; 8:11); (3) God's silence and unknowability (3:11; 7:14; 7:13; 11:5); (4) the problem of evil (3:16; 4:1–3; 10:1); and (5) the cyclical nature of time, which thwarts progress and hope (1:3–11, 2:1–9,15).

Why such a despairing book is in the Bible is a question for the theologians rather than the philosophers, but it is probably part of the rabbinic confrontational teaching method in ancient Judaism, which was in one way surprisingly similar to the "Socratic Method" that Socrates would make famous later in Greece: teaching by dialectic, or dialog, or debate; by question and answer. (Classic question: Why does a rabbi always answer a question with another question? Answer: Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with another question?)

The whole of religious Judaism is put into a debate in this book. The author implicitly asks: If the Jewish religion is the answer, what is the question? An answer is only as important as the question it answers. *Ecclesiastes* gets the question out: Isn't life really meaningless, as it seems to be to common sense and observation? What is its ultimate meaning, its highest good, if it has one? Only at the very end does this book give the answer: "The end of the matter—all has been heard: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work and every secret thing into judgment, both good and evil." (12:13–14) Probably, this was written by a second author in answer to the first one.

Meaningless, or "vanity," is unbearable and unlivable. Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*, philosophizing about the Jewish experience in Nazi concentration camps, noted that many weak prisoners survived if they only found a meaning to their sufferings while many strong ones died because they didn't. Quoting Nietzsche, he observed that "A man can endure almost any *how* if only he has a *why*."

That is hopeful. But we still have to answer *Ecclesiastes*, which gives good *reasons* for meaninglessness. Read the book yourself; it's easy to find these reasons everywhere in life: evil, death, pain, injustice, ignorance, folly, failure, even time itself. If all human life is "under the sun" (in the world we see) and if everything "under the sun" is "vanity" because of all these reasons, it logically follows that all of human life is vanity.

Any argument must pass 3 check points to prove its conclusion, and thus there are only 3 ways to answer any argument. If you are to justify your disagreement with its conclusion you must find (1) a term used ambiguously, (2) a false premise, or (3) a logical fallacy (so that the conclusion does not logically follow from the premises even if the premises are all true).

Can you answer "Solomon's" argument in any one of these 3 ways? Let yourself be challenged by this rabbi. See if you can hold your own with this devil's advocate. And if you can't—well, then perhaps you should read the other philosophers in this book to get some help.

Selected Bibliography:

Three Philosophies of Life by Peter Kreeft

2. Zoroaster (ca. 600 B.C.)

"Zoroaster" (a Greek version of the ancient Iranian name "Zarathustra") lived in Eastern Iran, probably during the 6th century B.C. though legends place him as early as 3000 B.C. He founded the religion/philosophy of Zoroastrianism, which was once very widespread in Persia but was radically reduced by Islam. There are now about 250 million Zoroastrians left, most of them Parsis (or Parsees) in India.

Little is known about Zoroaster himself. He is said to have written many sacred scriptures, nearly all of which are lost, though the *Zend Avesta* partly survives. He claimed to be a prophet inspired by the one true God. He was rejected in his wife's home town, had great opposition spreading his teaching, and was murdered at an altar. (Prophets know that religion is a non-profit organization.) Greek, Roman, and medieval legends (mistakenly) ascribed to him the invention of astrology and magic. Pliny says Zoroaster miraculously laughed on the day of his birth, and that his head pulsated so powerfully that it repelled your hand if you touched it. (The FDA would have mandated a warning label: "Danger! Philosophical Wisdom inside!")

Nietzsche, the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* and the enemy of religion and morality, entitled his masterpiece *Thus Spake Zarathustra* to satirize Zoroaster's moral and religions dualism, i.e. his idea of the world as a battleground between good and evil.

When Muslims conquered Persia, they came to the conclusion that Zoroaster was a true prophet of the one true God, like Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Zoroastrianism, Manicheeism, Taoism and Hinduism are all forms of good-evil dualisms. But they are all different:

Manicheeism, founded by Mani (226–276 A.D.), also labeled Zoroaster a prophet, along with Jesus and Buddha; but Manicheism changed Zoroaster's doctrine from monotheism to a two-god dualism, denied that God created the material world, and declared all matter evil. Augustine flirted with Manicheism for a decade before he rejected it as irrational and immoral.

Zoroastrianism is also distinguished from Taoism (Ch. 6) concerning good and evil. Taoism claims that manifestations of Tao, or "the Way of ultimate reality," always involve two opposite sides, Yin and Yang, dark and light, death and life, like "The Force" in "Star Wars."

Ancient Hinduism also teaches that the supreme Reality, Brahman, manifests Himself or Itself equally as Vishnu the creator and Shiva the destroyer. When Brahman sleeps, He becomes Vishnu and dreams a world into being; when He wakes, He becomes Shiva and destroys the world.

Most of the basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are strikingly similar to those of the three major Abrahamic religions:

(1) There is one omniscient and omnipotent God ("Ahura Mazda"), who is "truth" or "light" and perfect moral goodness. Evil does not originate with Him.

(2) God created first invisible (spiritual) worlds and then the visible (material) world.

(3) The invisible world contains a hierarchy of spirits to rule the creation and to guard mankind. These are called gods, so Zoroastrianism is often labeled a polytheism; but these are more like angels, made by God to do His work.

(4) From primeval man came the first man and woman, from whom all men are descanded.

(5) Human beings are created good. They share God's spiritual nature.

(6) Evil has infiltrated the material world, but matter is not evil. The origin of evil is Ahriman, an evil spirit.

(7) We have free choice. Life is essentially a battlefield between good and evil.

(8) There is life after death, when spirits, which are immortal, leave bodies.

(9) God judges all choices justly after death, rewarding the good with an eternal Heaven and punishing the evil with an eternal Hell. Heaven is joy, which comes from the light of God. Hell is darkness, misery, and punishment from evil spirits. There is also a purgatorial waiting period between death and the Last Judgment, where we receive a vision of every thought, word, and deed we chose during life.

(10) Zoroaster is only one prophet among others. The last, Shoshyant or Saoshyant, a Messianic savior-figure, will usher in the day of judgment and the final destruction of all evil.

(11) Earth and air, and most especially fire and water, are sacred and must be kept pure. Zoroastrians pray in the presence of fire and in fire temples.

(12) Contact with impure matter, especially dead bodies, is forbidden. Corpses are ritually exposed to vultures on "Towers of Silence." (This practice is usually omitted today because the nearly extinct vulture population is simply not up to the job.)

(13) The three basic moral obligations are to have good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.

(14) Like Muslims, Zoroastrians pray five times a day.

(15) Ritual purifications, chants, and sacrifices are offered by priests to purify the world and mankind.

There are numerous differences between the teaching of Zoroaster and those of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad in particulars and in practice, but the similarities are quite striking. Accounting for them is a very interesting philosophical question.

3. Shankara (788–820 A.D.)

Although Shankara lived long after the anonymous sages who wrote the Hindu holy books that he learned from and commented on (the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*), he is the clearest, profoundest, most philosophical and most influential teacher of them, so we classify him as one of the ancient sages.

It is said that the god Shiva appeared in a dream to Shankara's father, who was a rich but childless Brahmin, asking him to choose between a wise and virtuous but short-lived son or an ordinary and long-lived one. He replied, wisely, "Do whatever is best for humanity." His son, named Shankara, or "bestower of happiness," became the greatest of all Hindu thinkers, but died at 32. His father died when Shankara was 3. (Remarkably few philosophers' fathers survived their son's adolescence; is there a connection?)

Shankara became a sage only with his mother's permission, which was elicited from a crocodile. When the animal grabbed the boy's leg as he was bathing in the river and began to pull him into deep water, he shouted to his mother, on the riverbank, "Give me permission to leave home and become a sanyassi [wandering ascetic sage], or else I shall die with unfulfilled desires and not leave this world in peace." She gave her permission, and immediately some fishermen netted the crocodile and saved Shankara.

His wanderings led him to the cave of a guru (Govindapada) who asked him the key question "Who are you?" He answered: "**I am neither earth, water, fire, air, or sky. I am not the sense organs, nor the mind. I am the Supreme Consciousness underlying all.**"

Once, Shankara asked an "untouchable" chandal (keeper of cremation grounds) to get out of his way. The "outcaste" answered: "To whom were your words addressed, O learned sir? To the body, which comes from the same source and performs the same functions for both a Brahmin and an outcaste? Or to the soul [*atman*], which is also the same in all? How do such differences as 'This is a Brahmin, this is an outcaste' arise in the Advaita (nondualistic, monistic, pantheistic) world, which is the philosophy you preach? Is the sun changed in the least if it reflects in the latrine or in the holy river Ganges?" Shankara immediately fell at the outcaste's feet, recognizing him as the god Shiva in disguise.

Shankara wrote three commentaries: on the *Braha Sutra*, on the *Upanishads*, and on the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Almost all Hindu philosophers commented on the first, which consists of 522 obscurely terse aphorisms, various interpretations of which had

produced various opposing schools of Hindu philosophy. Shankara united all these strands by showing that his Advaita interpretation alone could account for the truths in all the others, thus spiritually uniting India. In this he was a kind of Hindu St. Thomas Aquinas.

During his travels he recognized the house of a philosopher by the fact that at the gate there were parrots in cages arguing abstract philosophical questions. (This is how students recognize the philosophy department of their university.)

Shankara walked to all parts of India, defeating all the great philosophers in debate. He resolved all questions except those about erotic love, posed by a woman—until he entered the body of a dead king and vicariously "traversed the perfumed gardens of the *Kama Sutra*" (the Hindu ritual religious erotic love manual) by miraculous yogic powers.

Shankara is the classic Hindu philosopher. Hinduism is an extremely subtle and sophisticated system of *yogas*, or spiritual disciplines, a kind of interior technology or spiritual athleticism based on 4000 years of experience. The advantage of our radically short and inadequate treatment of this system, rather than a longer one, is that it cannot even pretend to completeness. Summarizing 4000 years in one page, forsooth!

The *Upanishads* are the most philosophical of Hindu scriptures. They are preceded by the *Vedas*, which are more mythical and poetical, and followed by the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is more practical and personal.

The basic insight of the *Upanishads*, the idea that is the center of Shankara's philosophy, is that reality is absolutely single: all things are appearances of one reality, which is perfect, eternal, mental, and spiritual. The *Upanishads* call it "**Brahman**," "the great one." It may be personified as a divine person, or seen as an impersonal force or entity, but it is in reality neither a 'he' nor a 'she' nor an 'it.' It is *neti, neti*: "**not this, not that**." It is infinite, formless, and indefinable.

Because this central concept of the *Upanishads* is so foreign to most Westerners, it may be well to compromise a bit and approach it by beginning with a more familiar Western concept, then altering it. Take the concept of God in Western religions, then subtract personality, will, and miraculous action such as the creation of a universe of real matter. Now you have something like Brahman: an impersonal, eternal, divine Mind. Everything is a dream of that mind (in earlier, cruder versions of this monism, everything was a part of that *body*), everything is in that mind, and thus everything really *is* that mind, is not other than that mind, as your ideas are not other than your mind.

Thus all is one. The *Upanishads* say that **"'One' is the word of truth; 'two' is the word of error."**

Brahman transcends all dualities:

* the I-Thou (person-to-person) duality (we are all one self, *Atman*)
* the I-it (person vs. thing) duality (Brahman is neither person nor thing)
* the one-thing-vs.-another-thing duality (Brahman is not a particular finite thing)

* the God-world duality (there is no Creator-creature distinction)
* even the God-yourself duality ("**tat tvam asi,**" "thou art that")

This metaphysics has life-changing practical consequences. We discover our own identity with Brahman, our identity *as* Brahman, when we discover the depths of our souls as "Atman.," the single self that we all ultimately are parts of, or appearances of, or masks for, and which is really divine.

The central affirmation of the *Upanishads* is "**tat tvam asi**," "**thou (*Atman*) art that (*Brahman*)**." Through contemplative meditation ("jnana yoga"), you find that in the depth of your self, you are *Atman*, the single universal self or soul of which the ego (*jiva*) is a mere appearance or localization, like sunlight reflected in a tiny broken piece of mirror. And this *Atman* is *Brahman*, the One Divine Mind in which all things and persons are ultimately only Its thoughts. You discover your supreme identity only when you lose your separate identity. It is a syllogism: You are Atman, and Atman is Brahman, therefore you are Brahman.

How then explain the fact that I don't seem to be Brahman? How explain the appearance of manyness and separation? By contrasting ordinary consciousness, which is deceptive, with mystical consciousness, which is enlightening. Ordinary consciousness is like standing on one of many offshore islands, seeing distinctions between your personal island and others, and between all islands and the mainland (God); but mystical consciousness is like an ocean diver's view of all islands as mere protuberances of a single undersea continent, which is also one with the mainland because it is all one single earth. Hinduism provides us with a diving suit.

The basic question that arises from this absolute monism ("one-ism") is "the problem of the one and the many": If ultimate reality is one, is manyness real or unreal? And if it is merely an unreal appearance, how and why did this appearance arise?

Shankara's answer is simple: absolute oneness logically entails also an absolute oneness between oneness and manyness! Oneness "eats" or assimilates manyness. There is no duality whatsoever. Manyness seems to be other than, and in contrast with, oneness, but *no* otherness or contrast can be 'really real,' even the contrast between oneness and manyness or between reality and appearance. There is only Brahman, "**the one without a second.**" This is very different from Jewish-Christian-Muslim theology, in which God is one *with* a second by creating a world distinct from Himself. (And in Christian theology, God is a Trinity of Persons, thus is also manyness as well as oneness in Himself.)

Though Hindu theology is strikingly different from Western, in being pantheistic and monistic as vs. creationist and theistic (i.e. with a sharp Creator-creature distinction), the two moralities and practical psychologies are strikingly similar, especially when it comes

to the question of man's true supreme good or "summum bonum," and the basic false alternatives to it. On the basis of thousands of years of "inner athleticism," India has discovered four layers to the psyche, and four fundamental "wants of man," viz. pleasure, power, altruism, and mystical enlightenment, or conscious union with Brahman, in his three attributes of "sat," "chit" and "ananda." (These stages correspond quite nicely to Kierkegaard's "stages on life's way"—see volume IV, chapter 73.) Progress in religion consists largely of dealing with these layers, one by one, getting the three shallower temptations out of one's system and discovering the deepest one underneath. That is the ostensible purpose of such questionable inventions as the "Kama Sutra" and the caste system.

Brahman is called *satchitananda,* or *sat* (**infinite reality**), *chit* (**infinite consciousness, infinite understanding**) and *ananda* (**infinite bliss**). This is realized by the mystical experience of *mukti* or *moksha* ("liberation, release"), which releases us from finitude, like a snake shedding its skin, revealing "the beyond within," the *satchitananda* that always was in us (or rather, we were always in it) because it is in everything (or rather, everything is in It, as a thought is in a mind).

We do not really change from not having *mukti* to having it, only from dreaming that we don't have it to waking up and realizing that we always had it. Time itself, and change, is not really real, but illusion (*maya*), dream. The dream of what we call the world is really a nightmare; for time-consciousness, which is the mode of consciousness of this dream, is the source of all desire (for the future) and therefore also of all pain (in the future-deprived present). (You probably need to read that sentence twice to "get" it.)

A later, more popular thinker, Ramanuja, chose the opposite answer to the question of the one and the many: that manyness is real, especially personal manyness; and that the height of mystical enlightenment is not the perception of the unreality of the many but of the union, or unification, of two really distinct persons, the human self and Brahman. "**I don't want to be sugar, I want to taste sugar**," said Ramanuja. (The implication was: "I don't want to be God, I want to experience God.") Of the four yogas, or spiritual disciplines, in Hinduism, two of them (jnana and raja) tend to align with Shankara and two (karma and bhakti) with Ramanuja. These four yogas fit four different personality types: intellectual, experimental, active, and emotional, respectively.

Hinduism is a philosophy as well as a religion, in the sense that both Shankara and Ramanuja use philosophical reasoning, but only to explain, not to prove, their religious experience. Their primary authority is not reason but esoteric (private) mystical experience, which trumps both the ordinary reasoning which comes from ordinary, non-mystical consciousness and also exoteric (public, written) religious authority. Western religions judge the esoteric experiences of their mystics by their exoteric scriptures, which they believe to be divinely revealed. But Eastern religions interpret their exoteric scriptures by their esoteric mystical experiences.

Hindu mystics often claim to transcend the very law of non-contradiction itself, the ultimate law of logic. For the same mind (Brahman) can dream opposite dreams; and if all Its dreams are equally real, being equally only dreams of the same Mind, then opposite and even contradictory dreams can both be equally true.

Is this rational philosophy or mystical religion? It is philosophy in that it makes philosophical claims about reality and the self, but it is not philosophy in that it does not appeal to universal human reason as its final authority.

It is also philosophical in that it is a world-view that logically entails a life-view. It is a vision of reality that has enormous consequences for transforming one's life. If one believes that all things and persons in the world are really only one and the same perfect, divine reality, one will have nothing to fear. Attaining this "enlightenment" is called *mukti*, "release" because it releases one not only in thought from the illusion of finitude but also in practice from the desire and fear which mistake that illusion for reality. Before "enlightenment" we are like children so engrossed in a book that we do not realize that all the desirable candies and fearful monsters we see in its pages are only images. After "enlightenment," even death will cease to appear fearful, for one's very self, soul as well as body, will be seen to be no more and no less than an image or dream of Brahman. Reincarnation too (the soul returning to earth after death in other bodies) is seen by the enlightened mystic as only a symbol or myth, an image or a dream; for since Brahmnan is the only self, it follows that "**Brahman is the only reincarnator**," as the *Upanishads* argue. The rational arguments are not *for* Mukti as the conclusion but *from* it as the premise.

The typically Western mind, whether religious or secular, tends to be skeptical of this monism for many reasons: (1) because it seems to depress the value and reality of "the many," (2) especially of the individual human person; (3) because it seems to encourage us to simply ignore and disbelieve in death, pain, and evil rather than taking them seriously and fighting them; (4) because it seems arrogant to claim that one's ultimate identity is really divine; (5) because it seems to remove itself from rational critique, and (6) because it seems to reduce morality to a means for purifying selfish desires in order to attain mystical enlightenment rather than taking morality with ultimate seriousness as a response to justice or the will of God.

The Hindu philosopher would reply that each of these six criticisms rests on a questionable *assumption*: that manyness, personhood, evil, creaturehood, reason, and morality are ultimately real. (How would you resolve this argument?)

Hinduism contains or embraces more than one philosophy. (Some distinguish *six*.) Shankara's is the oldest, most classical form of Hinduism, often called Vedanta Hinduism because it harks back to the earliest Hindu scriptures, the Vedas. It is also called Advaita (nondualism).

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The Bhagavad-Gita

4. Gotama the Buddha (563–483 B.C.)

"Buddha," like "Christ," is not a name but a honorific title. It means "**the man who woke up**." A Buddhist is essentially one who believes that Gotama Siddhartha was "the Buddha," the supremely "awakened" man, and that the meaning of life is to be a Buddha, to wake up.

The essential experience of Buddhism is "enlightenment," or "awakening," or "**Nirvana**," which means, literally, "extinguishing"—the extinguishing of ordinary consciousness and desire, as all the thoughts, desires and fears of a dream are extinguished when we wake from sleep. This mystical experience is somewhat understandable even to us non-mystics who have never experienced it by the analogy of waking up, for Nirvana is a little bit *like* what actually happened to each one of us each morning: the extinguishing of one mode of consciousness (dreaming) and its replacement with a radically different mode of consciousness (waking). It is not a new ingredient in the world but a whole new world. More than that, even: it is not just a new world but a new *kind* of world, and a new kind of consciousness.

The story of Gotama's own enlightenment is dramatic. His father was a king in India some 26 centuries ago. A prophecy at Gotama's birth said that this child would be either the greatest world-conquering king or the greatest world-renouncing ascetic and mystic. In order to make the first half of the prophecy come true, Gotama's father tried to make kingship totally attractive to his son by surrounding him with palace luxury, allowing nothing bad to enter and not allowing Gotama to leave. But the curious youth escaped four times and saw "the Four Distressing Sights": a sick man, an old man, a dead man, and a begging man. No one could tell him *why* anyone got sick, old, or dead. But the begging man was an old Hindu ascetic who had renounced the world to solve that great riddle of life, and Gotama left the palace, joined the ascetics (*sanyassin*), and practiced the severest self-denial for years, but he came no closer to solving the great riddle.

Finally, he took a decent meal for the first time in years, thereby scandalizing all but five of his ascetic friends, who became his first disciples. This was his first discovery: "**the middle way**" between self-indulgence and self-mortification, neither of which had produced enlightenment. He then sat down under the Bodhi tree in the Deer Park in Benares (it's still there!), and resolved not to rise until he had read the riddle of pain. When he arose, he said "I am Buddha," and announced "the Four Noble Truths" as the essence of his enlightenment, insofar as it could be put into words at all.

Perhaps the most important words are those: that it *cannot* be put into words, that all words deceive. This is also the very first point of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (see chapter 6): that "the Way that can be told is not the real Way."

When a disciple (Malunkyaputta) demanded that Gotama answer the four classic philosophical questions that all the other Hindu sages had answered, he refused, and gave Malunkyaputta "the Arrow Sermon" instead. He told Malunkyputta the story of a man who was dying of a poisoned arrow. Before he allowed the doctor to heal him, he demanded an explanation of all the details of the shooting: the shooter, his age, his clan, his motive, the arrow, the feathers, the wood, etc. "That man would die before the arrow was out. And you are that man." The arrow is suffering, and Buddha's treatment is not philosophical explanation but radical surgery: an "extinction" of the organ that suffers, an operation to remove the cause of suffering, which is desire itself.

The Four Noble Truths are:

1. To live is to suffer (***dukkha***: the word means literally a bone or axle out of joint, a stick broken in half, alienated from itself): suffering pervades all of life. If you love or hate anything at all, something you hate is always present and something you love is always absent; thus you always suffer something.

2. The cause of suffering is desire (***tanha*****:** "grasping," greed, egotism). This is the most essential step in a medical analysis, the step you pay the expert doctor for: the diagnosis of the cause of the disease. Here is Buddha's radical diagnosis: we are unhappy because there is a gap between desire and satisfaction, and that gap is caused by desire itself. So it is selfish desire that causes unhappiness.

3. The way to the extinction *(Nirvana)* of suffering is the extinction of desire. The Third Noble Truth logically follows from the second, for to remove the effect, we must remove the cause. We normally try to close the gap between desire and satisfaction by maximizing satisfactions. Buddha observes that this path never works, and advises us instead to minimize desires, in fact to eliminate them altogether.

The Greek Stoics argued similarly, but were content to advise us to merely be satisfied with what we had. Buddha notes that even this causes pain, because what we have, including life itself, will soon be taken from us. So he teaches not just a rational acceptance of the inevitable, like the Stoics, but a mystical transformation of consciousness, a desire-ectomy. The Stoics told us to submit desire to reason, but Buddha told us to submit it to the knife. Desire is a wild animal: Stoicism says "Tame it" but Buddhism says "Kill it."

4. The way to extinguish desire is the Noble Eightfold Path. The Fourth Noble Truth tells us how to do that surgical desire-ectomy. Human life, inner and outer, is divided into eight dimensions, and in each of them desire is to be minimized until it reaches zero. At that point, the "bliss" of Nirvana replaces the pain of desire.

The Four Noble Truths are for Buddha the closest that words can come to explaining the way to the wordless. They are utterly logical. They follow the essential logical structure of all practical thinking in giving us

(1) the bad effects,
(2) the bad cause,
(3) the good effect, and
(4) the good cause;

or, in medical terms,

(1) the *observation* of the symptoms,
(2) the *diagnosis* of the disease,
(3) the *prognosis* of the cure, and
(4) the *prescription* for the treatment.

This is extremely useful because all other practical philosophers' analyses of the human condition follow the form of these four steps even if their content differs from Buddha's. For instance, Jesus' "four noble truths" are (1) death, (2) sin, (3) eternal life, and (4) divine grace (cf. Rom 6:23). Socrates' "four noble truths" are (1) vice, (2) ignorance, (3) virtue, and (4) wisdom. Marx's "four noble truths" are (1) class conflict and oppression, (2) capitalism, (3) communism's classless society, and (4) revolution to eliminate the bourgeoisie (capitalists). Buddha is like Aristotle in form, though not in content: where Aristotle discovered the essential logical form of all theoretical thinking, Buddha did the same for practical thinking.

There is much more to Buddhism than this, but this is the heart of the *dharma* (doctrine, teaching) that unites all Buddhists. The main division is between original ("Theravada") Buddhism and later Mahayana ("Big Raft") Buddhism, which revolve around (1) whether enlightenment should be individual or collective and (2) which of the two main Buddhist virtues, enlightened wisdom (***prajna***) or desireless compassion (***karuna***), should come first. Some forms of Buddhism aim at changing consciousness by changing desires, which are the cause of unenlightened consciousness as well as the cause of pain. Other forms of Buddhism, such as Zen (which means "meditation"), do the reverse: they aim at changing (and eliminating) desires by changing consciousness. For when we *see* that the ego and the world are fictions, we will no longer have desires or fears, for we will see that there *is* nothing there to desire or fear—like a little child in a movie theater suddenly realizing that the scary things he sees on the screen are not real.

One of the most puzzling philosophical claims of Buddhism is that in Nirvana, or Enlightenment, we see through the individual ego as an illusion. (David Hume, 24 centuries later, would teach the same startling conclusion from the very different, non-mystical, premise of Empiricism.) According to Buddhism, the ego is an illusion caused by egotism, or selfish desire (*tanha*), rather than selfish desire being caused by a real ego. So if we play "knock, knock" with ourselves and ask "Who's there?" we should get the answer: "Nobody."

We naturally ask, then, who is it that is doing this knocking and answering? And Buddhism's ultimate answer is: Nobody. It just happens, like weather. "It" rains. Who is "it"? Like clouds of galactic gas coalescing into stars, the "strands" (*skhandas*) of impersonal consciousness become knotted at birth and unknotted at death, and between those two events there only *seems* to be a single substantial rope but it is only the separate strands. Really, there is no such thing as a person. Once this is realized, there is nothing and no one to hate or fear.

A Buddhist parable illustrates this. A man who could not swim, caught by a storm at sea, tried to dock his boat but was blocked by a second boat which kept coming between him and the dock. The wind eventually capsized the first boat, and the sailor, sinking, cursed and shook his fist at the second boat, which had been responsible for his death. But just before he drowned, he saw who had been sailing the second boat: no one. It was just the wind. There was no one to blame or hate, and his fist unclenched as he realized this and drowned in a state of Nirvana.

Another parable shows how this mode of consciousness ("enlightenment") is radically other than our normal one. A man, chased by a tiger to the edge of a cliff, let himself down the face of the cliff on a vine. But he saw a second tiger on the ground waiting to eat him. He was suspended between the two tigers on a sheer cliff. Then he noticed two mice, one white and one black, nibbling through the vine from the north and from the south. Just before the vine broke, he noticed a large wild strawberry growing out of the cliff. He plucked and ate it, and it was delicious.

The Western thinker expects the man to distract the tiger with the strawberry and save his life. But the enlightened Buddhist's reaction to this story is: "And the man tasted as good to the tiger as the strawberry tasted to the man." For the tiger, the man, and the strawberry *are one*—just as in Shankara's Hinduism. Buddhism is really a distilled-down Hinduism made utterly simple and practical, a Hinduism without Atman or Brahman: a *tat tvam asi* without either *tat* or *tvam*.

That leaves only *asi*, or "it is." This "it is" (*esti* in Greek) is the same affirmation Parmenides would soon make in ancient Greece (chapter 15), though Parmenides arrived at it by the very different path of abstract logical reasoning.

The two main problems most Westerners have with Buddhism are its denial of personhood and its denial of the value of personal love as distinct from impersonal compassion (*karuna*), which is directed to all suffering beings equally and impartially, including animals as well as human persons. These two values (persons and love) are historically derived from Judaeo-Christian religion. Persons are seen as intrinsically valuable because they are created 'in the image of God.' And personal love (*agape*) is valued because it is seen as the closest human resemblance to what God is and does. These two values are now well ensconced at the heart of our culture's secular value system too. (See, e.g. the United Nations "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and the "second categorical imperative" of Kant, chapter 67.) This is why Buddha's attack on the

individual ego as well as egotism strikes most Westerners as a kind of spiritual euthanasia, curing the disease by killing the patient.

But Buddhists reply that there *is* no patient, only the disease, and that the disease (*tanha*) is the cause of the illusion that there is a patient!

A postscript on mysticism and philosophy: The above ideas are distinctively Buddhist, but there have been many other people in various times, places and cultures who also experienced and taught a transformation of consciousness so radical that it could not be expressed in ordinary language. They are called mystics.

One of the striking and challenging philosophical claims common to Buddhist and most non-Buddhist mysticism is the claim that our ordinary time-consciousness (*samsara*, "birth-and-death") is illusory, or at least less real, less true than mystical eternity-consciousness, in which everything that ever was, is, or will be is present at one end at once. ("Eternity" does not mean "time without end" but "not-time.") A Western example of this from the remarkable novel *Winter's Tale* by Mark Helprin:

Nothing is random, nor will anything ever be, whether a long string of perfectly blue days that begin and end in golden dimness, the most seemingly chaotic political acts, the rise of a great city, the crystalline structure of a gem that has never seen the light, the distributions of fortune, what time the milkman gets up, the position or the electron, or the occurrence of one astonishingly frigid winter after another. . . . And yet there is a wonderful anarchy, in that the milkman chooses when to arise, the rat picks the tunnel into which he will dive when the subway comes rushing down the track from Borough Hall, and the snowflake will fall as it will. How can this be? If nothing is random and everything is predetermined, how can there be free will? The answer to that is simple. Nothing is predetermined, it is determined . . . it all happened at once, in less than an instant, and time was invented because we cannot comprehend in one glance the enormous and detailed canvas that we have been given. . . . Everything that ever was, is; everything that ever will be, is. . . . Though in perceiving it we imagine that it is in motion and unfinished, it is quite finished and quite astonishingly beautiful . . .

The non-mystic often feels that the claims of mysticism are not fair, since it is impossible to judge, or even to know how to judge, such claims with ordinary non-mystical consciousness, i.e. with philosophical reason. But the mystic responds that this impossibility is exactly what one would expect if the claim is true.

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5. Confucius (551–479 B.C.)

Confucius (K'ung Fu) was born illegitimate. His father died when he was three, leaving his family in poverty. Confucius had to go to work to support his mother. When she died, he turned his family home into a school, where he taught history, poetry, philosophy, morality, rules of proper conduct, and the arts. Teaching did not make him enough money to live on, so he took various jobs and travelled to neighboring states to advise various rulers. He was usually unwelcome and unsuccessful there because of his forthrightness and questioning, rather like Socrates.

Confucius' philosophy was mainly concerned with proper and harmonious human relationships. He was the single most influential and successful social and political reformer in history. His system, which was institutionalized throughout China only centuries after his death, kept the world's largest and most populous nation together in relative peace, stability, and contentment for 2100 years, until Mao Zedong's radically opposite philosophy of class conflict and violent revolution replaced it, perhaps forever, perhaps only temporarily—only time will tell.

Confucius' character was that of the ideal teacher: humble, gentle, patient, witty, open, and ever ready to engage in dialog and questioning—very like Socrates, without the syllogistic logic.

Confucius lived in the 6th century B.C., the so-called "axial period" during which human consciousness everywhere in the world simultaneously was becoming more self-conscious. The late Hebrew prophets, the earliest Greek philosophers, Zoroaster in Persia, Buddha, and the writer(s) of the Bhagavad-Gita in India, and both Confucius and Lao Tzu in China, all lived during the same century. In China this was the "period of warring states," violent civil wars throughout China. Tradition was breaking down. A "generation gap" was opening up, dividing China from its own past as well as dividing generations of its present citizens against each other.

Confucius' reforms were not successful, not institutionalized, in his own lifetime, but after his death they became so popular that no philosopher in history has ever had more of a total influence over the minds and lives of more people. He was known simply as "the first teacher." Every schoolchild memorized his maxims and every family lived by them for two millennia.

But there is a puzzle. When we read his main work, the *Analects*, in light of this success story, we are amazed by our lack of amazement. The philosophy seems to consist of nothing but safe and obvious platitudes, plus fussily detailed rules of good manners. (Perhaps those are two of the things we ourselves have forgotten and need to return to?) Confucius is an arch-conservative; tradition was sacred for him. But it worked—and that

is the fundamental argument for it. It was human and humane, and therefore worked for human beings, leading them to live more human and happy lives. Can philosophy do anything more important than that?

Confucius, like Aristotle, habitually chose moderation, and middle positions between extremes. For instance, two opposite political philosophies of his time were Mo Tzu's Mohism (Ch. 7), which taught that people were essentially good and that love is all you need, and the philosophy of the so-called Realists, which solved all political problems with two words: "hit them." (Rousseau and Machiavelli or Hobbes are close Western equivalents to these two.) Confucius deliberately chose a middle position: man is not born either good *or* evil, but *able* to be good by being trained and taught rightly. Thus education was the key to the good life and the good society. (This was essentially Plato's answer too.)

Confucius' moderation and humor are seen in the following anecdotes. When the skeptic Tsai Wo, who thought Confucius too close to the Mohists because of his altruism, said to Confucius, "If someone said there is a man in the well, the altruist, I suppose, would go after him," Confucius replied that even an altruist would first make sure there really was a man in the well. When an overly rationalistic and careful thinker said he would think three times before acting, Confucius replied, "Twice is sufficient."

Confucius taught five fundamental virtues, each of which is deeper and more complex than any single English word that tries to translate it.

The most fundamental is **JEN**, which is basic goodness, good-will, benevolence, or human-heartedness. The Chinese character is a combination of "two" and "man," showing that this is the most fundamental of all relationships to others. Confucius formulated its basic rule as "**Do not do to anyone what you do not want them to do to you**"—a corollary of the "Golden Rule" which has been called "the Silver Rule."

A second virtue is **CHUN TZU**, which means largeness of spirit, the opposite of pettiness. It literally means "the superior person"—the big person in spirit, not necessarily in body. This virtue makes room in itself for everyone, and expresses itself in hospitality, maturity, and taking responsibility for others' happiness.

A third virtue, **LI**, means "what is proper, fitting, or appropriate." In other words, proper manners. A canny psychologist, Confucius knew that careful, deliberate external acts of toeing the line and obeying the rules powerfully trained and conditioned us to personal moral virtue by constructing habits of obedience. There were elaborate rules of how to treat different members of the typically very large extended family, and life became like an elegant ballroom dance. **LI** also concerned the proper use of language, and "the rectification of names," for "**if language is not in accord with the truth of things, no affairs can be carried out to success.**" Propriety entailed the "Golden Mean," "nothing to excess." The self-control and moderation behind this behavior, which was emphasized also by the Greeks, is almost the very definition of civilization as opposed to barbarism.

A fourth virtue, **TE**, means spiritual power, or the power of moral example, the power of moral heroes. (A world without heroes is a world without ideals and therefore without morality.) Instead of "might makes right," Confucius taught that right makes its own might. **TE** is the beauty, the attraction, the spiritual gravity, that radiates from the saint.

Finally, **WEN** means "the arts of peace." Confucius deeply appreciated the arts. He once could not taste his food for three months because a musical melody moved him so deeply. Art was to be pursued not for art's sake but for man's sake, for morality's sake, for peace's sake. Art trains the emotions to love what is beautiful and conditions the will to love what is good, for the beautiful and the good are almost the same thing. (The Greeks thought exactly the same, and had a single word for both aesthetic and moral goodness, *to kalon*, "the fine," "the noble," "the beautiful," and sometimes *to-kalon-kai-to-agathon*, "the-beautiful-and-the-good."

Confucius is a clear example of *virtue ethics*, the Chinese equivalent of Aristotle. Modern Western philosophy, by contrast, typically tends to some more rationalistic, rule-oriented, or egotistic ethic, such as Hedonism (the good = pleasure), Stoicism (the good = inner peace), Utilitarianism (the good = the useful), Emotivism (the good = a projection of your personal preferences), Kantian "deonontologism" (the good = the motive of duty), the Social Contract Theory (the good = an artificial contract), Cultural Relativism (the good = construct and consensus) or biologism (the good = evolutionary survival value).

Confucianism is a commonsensical and psychologically perceptive and satisfying system. What does it lack? Are we, who find Confucius a bit boring, simply spoiled, jaded, and shallow? Perhaps Lao Tzu, our next philosopher, will answer that question.

The reader should thank me for resisting the temptation to include any of the thousands of "Confucius say" jokes that can be found on the Internet, many of which are racist, stupid, insulting, and quite funny.

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The Analects by Confucius

6. Lao Tzu (b. 604 B.C.)

Lao Tzu may have lacked something no other philosopher in this book lacked: real existence. Some scholars believe he was a myth. His name means simply "the old man" or "the old master." His dates are uncertain, ranging from the 13th to the 3rd century B.C., but most texts locate him in the 6th century B.C., which Karl Jaspers called the "axial period" of the development of human consciousness. (See chapter 5, above, on this.)

According to the old records, Lao Tzu and Confucius are the only two religious founders who ever met each other. Confucius wrote, of the meeting, "**I know a bird can fly; I know a fish can swim; I know animals can run. Creatures that run can be caught in nets; those that swim can be caught in traps; those that fly can be hit by arrows. But the dragon is beyond my knowledge: it ascends into heaven on the clouds and the wind. Today I have seen Lao Tzu, and he is like the dragon.**" The practical man of reason and common sense (Confucius) respects the romantic and the mystic (Lao Tzu) even though he does not understand him.

We do not know what Lao Tzu thought of Confucius personally, but he was so disillusioned with Confucianism as a set of rules that he left the cities of China, where Confucius was teaching, and rode on a water buffalo into Mongolia, never to return. Such was his fame, however, that the gate keeper would not let him through until he had shared his wisdom in writing—something that he, like Jesus, Socrates, and Buddha, had never done. He took three days to write the 81 short poems of the "Tao Te Ching," gave them to the gatekeeper, was let through, and was never heard from again.

The four most fundamental concepts of the philosophy of Lao Tzu are (1) **Tao** itself, (2) **te,** the power of Tao,(3) **wei-wu-wei,** "doing by not doing" and (4) **yin & yang**.

(1) "Tao" means simply "the way." It is (a) the way of life of the sage in conformity to (b) the way of nature, which in turn manifests (c) the way of ultimate reality. The three Taos are one. Like Buddha and other mystics, Lao Tzu says this Tao cannot be put into words. The *Tao Te Ching* begins by saying that "**The Tao that can be told is not the true Tao.**"

It is not manifested in words and rules, a la Confucianism, but in things and events in nature. It is like water (water is the Taoists' favorite natural image): humbly, quietly, and gradually conforming itself to other beings and nourishing them. It is like a woman's womb (another favorite image), fruitful and giving of itself, bringing forth fullness from its own inner life-giving emptiness, not insisting on its own will and way, altruistic rather than egotistic. (In this latter way it is like Confucianism.)

(2) In this apparent weakness is the secret of power (*te*), like the power of gentle raindrops patiently wearing away rocks. (Compare the Christian image of Christ as the "lamb" of God.) The *Tao Te Ching* itself manifests this subtle and winsome power (the *te* of the *Tao*) over the reader's spirit. The book practices what it preaches. Be prepared to have that happen to you when you read it; it is like a gentle sunrise.

(3) The lifestyle that "plugs into" this Tao is one of *wei wu wei,* "doing by not doing." This is the paradox of power through weakness, creativity through conformity to Tao, riding the Tao like a "soul-surfer" on a wave, letting Tao come in one end of the soul and out the other. Taoist art is simple, natural, and mysteriously powerful, like the Tao itself. Lao Tzu applies *wei wu wei* even to politics: he tells rulers to "**govern large nations as you cook small fish.**"

Suppleness rather than rigidity is the ideal, being like stem cells, or like the flesh and malleable habits of babies rather than the brittle skin and settled habits of the old—or like willow trees that bend in the storm rather than hard oaks that crack. "**The most valuable part of a bowl is the emptiness inside.**" A bowl—or a mind—that is full cannot receive and grow. You can't use a door unless it opens. Moral goodness can't come just from following rules, but only by an opening-up to Tao.

(4) *Yin* and *Yang,* the cosmic feminine and masculine, expresses the relativity of all qualities: hot & cold, wet & dry, high & low, birth & death, pain & pleasure, strength & weakness, even good & evil in the sense of good fortune & bad fortune. Our attempts to get one half of the dualism without the other necessarily fail, because they run counter to nature, the "way" things are. Wisdom embraces both, in embracing the whole, which is the Tao. Each half implies and requires the other. Life is a dance, and "it takes two to tango." (Is this true of moral goods as well as physical goods? Do we have to be wicked in order to be saintly?)

The *Tao Te Ching* is, next to the Bible, the most translated book in the world, and one of the most read. It is loved not only by Taoists but also by Confucians, Buddhists, Hindus, and many Christians. It has some startling similarities to Jesus' "sermon on the mount" (Matthew 5–7), but without the context of a personal, loving God.

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The Tao of Pooh by Benjamin Hoff

7. Mo Tzu (d 438 B.C.)

(1) Mo Tzu, founder of Mohism, began as a Confucian but, like Lao Tzu, reacted against Confucius' emphasis on ceremony, hierarchy, elaborate rules, and social order.

(2) His main idea is universal love as the primary human good and the foundation of both the family and the state. One must love all others with the same love as you love yourself.

This morality was unattractive to politicians, since no successful state has ever been founded on its basis, and because love is not something rulers can control. (Compare Machiavelli, who says "it is better to be feared than to be loved, for men will love you when they will but fear you when *you* will.")

(3) Mo Tzu also taught that "the will of Heaven" was a personal God, and that

(4) Gods or spirits (something like angels) saw everything we do in life.

(5) He also believed in free will and opposed fatalism.

In all five of these ways, he was closer to Jesus' teachings than any other Chinese philosopher.

(6) He also listed three criteria for judging any belief:

(a) Trace its source, its past history.

(b) Examine its present situation, how ordinary people experience it.

(c) Test its future practicality by applying it to life, law, and politics.

Mo Tzu's successor, Mencius (Meng-zi, d 289 B.C.) modified Mo Tzu's "universal love" to include a hierarchy with unequal levels: love family more than strangers and people more than things.

8. Jesus (4 B.C.–29 A.D.)

Because he and his disciples claimed so much more for him, it is usually forgotten that Jesus was also a philosopher. For Jesus answers the four most fundamental questions of all philosophers, the question of metaphysics, the question of anthropology, the question of epistemology, and the question of ethics. His answers to those questions depend on something not original with him, but common to all of Biblical Judaism. In one word each, the answers are:

(1) In Jesus' metaphysics, the ultimate reality, the standard, source, and key to all other reality, is the One God, the Creator, whose self-revealed name is "*I AM*."

(2) In Jesus' anthropology, man is the creature who is made in God's image, and who is therefore also an "*I*," a person, conscious and free, knowing and willing.

(3) In Jesus' epistemology, man's highest knowledge of the greatest reality comes through *faith* in what God has spoken to man, the "Word of God," which for Christians is ultimately Jesus Himself.

(4) In Jesus' ethics, man's fundamental end, goal, and good is the *love* of God and man: **"You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."**

Buddhists believe that Buddha was a philosopher too, a wise man and a lover of wisdom, but also something more than a philosopher, for the whole point of his teaching was the transcendence of ordinary rational consciousness into "enlightenment." In a similar way Christians believe Jesus was a perfect and complete man, and therefore also a wise man and a lover of wisdom, and a philosopher, but that He was much more than that: that he was and is the end and object of all philosophy, the *Logos* or Mind or inner Word of God become man.

Buddhists summarize their philosophy in Four Noble Truths. Jesus's practical philosophy can also be summed up in "four noble truths":

(1) The primary *symptom* (effect) of man's most fundamental disease (sin) is *death*.

(2) The *diagnosis* of the disease (the cause of physical death) is *sin* (spiritual death), separation from God, the source of all life.

(3) The *cure* for this disease is *eternal life*, or being "born again."

(4) The *prescription* that brings about this cure is, on God's part, the gift ("grace") of the one who is named "Jesus" ("Savior"), titled "Christ" ("Messiah," the "Annointed one" or "Promised one"), and claimed to be the "son of God," and on man's part, repentance, faith, and baptism, which connect man up with God.

The fundamental *reason* Christians have for believing all this is Jesus Himself.

To understand this most influential man who ever lived, instead of reading later books *about* him and his teachings, first read the data, the four Gospels.

Obviously this "philosophy," which is both the most popular one in the entire world and also the most controversial, cannot be evaluated in a short chapter in a short book like this. Therefore I will not try.

A Note on Muhammad

Muhammad is one of the three or four most influential persons who ever lived, and the Qur'an is the most read, recited, and memorized book in the world. Yet we cannot treat Muhammad as a philosopher. For there is no such thing as "the philosophy of Muhammad." Muhammad was not a philosophical sage like Buddha or Lao Tzu or even Jesus (who was, after all, a rabbi, a teacher). His claim was to be simply a prophet, who wrote the very words, literally and exactly, that he heard from Allah through His archangel Gabriel. The Muslim claim is that nothing came *from* the mind of Muhammad, only from the Mind of God *through* His prophet; that Muhammad was simply one who listened and responded or "recited" (the meaning of "Qur'an"), who preached and practiced total "islam," ("surrender" or "submission") to the Will of Allah (the One God).

If this is not true, and the Qur'an came only from Muhammad's mind instead, then Muhammad was the greatest philosopher who ever lived, at least as far as the nature of ultimate reality, God, God's will, and morality are concerned—or else he learned his wisdom from the Jews and Christians he met.

Introduction to the Greeks

About a quarter of the 100 most historically important philosophers, by my estimation, are ancient Greeks, and for the first 13 of them (the "pre-Socratics") we have only fragments rather than any complete books. Yet because they were the pioneers, and according to an ancient Greek saying, "Well begun is half done."

My first and best philosophy teacher always took much time and care on the first few pages of a great book, showing us *how* to read it, by example, and then leaving us to finish on our own—like a father teaching his children how to ride a two-wheeler bike by giving them a long push at the start. It worked with individual books, and I think it also works with the long book that is the whole history of philosophy, "the great conversation."

In this history there have been four great centers of literary, philosophical, and scientific profundity and creativity, four places and times that drew great minds like magnets: Athens in the 5th century B.C., the medieval university of Paris in the 13th century, 18th century London, and 19th century Berlin.

Almost everything of lasting value in Western civilization comes from either the Jews or the Greeks. The Jews gave us God, and the consequences of God everywhere, especially in morality. The Greeks gave us reason, and the consequences of reason everywhere, especially in philosophy, science, technology, literature, art, and politics. They invented just about everything from democracy to after-dinner speaking.

Behind it all was their language, the very best language in the history of the world for philosophizing clearly, profoundly, and subtly, especially for making philosophical distinctions. The Greeks classified all other humans as "barbarians" because their language was not Greek. "Barbarian" means "one who says 'bar-bar,' like a dog." (Greek dogs apparently said "bar-bar," not "bow-wow.") Thus "Barbara" is as insulting a name as "Sophia" is a flattering one. For "Barbara" means "barbarian" and "Sophia" means "wisdom," which is the great love of the philosopher's life.

The early Greek philosophers are collectively called the "pre-Socratics" because they come before Socrates, who is a quantum leap forward in philosophy compared to all his predecessors. The pre-Socratics will appear crude, primitive, and even funny to you, like a toddler's crude, primitive, and funny first attempts to walk or talk. Yet the greatest achievement, the greatest progress, in our lives comes in these early years. For instance, learning language itself is a far greater achievement than learning a hundred new languages. We should see the "pre-Socratics" in the same way.

Selected Bibliography on the Presocratics:

Selections from Early Greek Philosophy edited by Milton Nahm
The Presocratics edited by Philip Wheelwright
Greek Philosophy by Robert Brumbaugh

9. Thales of Miletus (624–546 B.C.)

"What is great can only begin great," says Heidegger, arguing for our paying serious attention to the earliest, most "primitive" philosophers, the "pre-Socratics." If philosophy is great, it can only begin great—like you, dear reader. You are great because you are a member of the only known species in the universe that reasons, seeks wisdom, and philosophizes. Even your first faltering step was "great" to your parents. Thales took that first step in philosophy, uttering the first, barely articulate word of "the great conversation."

The word was **"water."** (It was the same word that first brought Helen Keller into the world of human reason, in *The Miracle Worker*. Could that be a mere coincidence?)

This was Thales' answer to *a new question*, and his importance is not in his answer (**"Everything is water"**) but in his question. The (implied) question was: *"What is everything?"*

The ancient Greeks saw the universe as a work of art, an ordered cosmos, not a chaos, and therefore as having a unity. Ever since, we have seen it that way. That is why we call it "the *uni*verse." The great question, then, was: What is its unity? What is "the one" behind "the many"?

Though Thales did not realize it, the question has four aspects, first clearly distinguished by Aristotle two centuries later in his *Metaphysics*, which he began with the first history of philosophy, interpreting all previous philosophers as gradually learning to ask these four questions, one by one. Aristotle classified all questions, and thus all answers, explanations, or "becauses," into four categories, which are traditionally called "the four causes." When we ask about any x that is made or comes into being, we may ask

(1) what x is made *of* (the **"material cause"**),
(2) what x is made *into* (the **"formal cause"**),
(3) what x is made *by* (the **"efficient cause"**), or
(4) what x is made *for* (the **"final cause"**).

As shown by his answer, Thales was really asking only for one of the four causes, the "material cause." He was asking: What is the single stuff everything is made of? (This would also be the one constant that remains through all changes.)

Thales did not distinguish philosophy from physical science. That distinction became wholly clear only with the rise of the scientific method, in the 16th and 17th centuries. Yet Thales was asking a philosophical question, not just a scientific question, because in asking it he was moving from the particular to the universal, from the many to the one, from the changing to the constant, and from the visible and sensory to the invisible and rational.

We have only four fragments of Thales, quoted by other authors, so we can only speculate about his *reasons* for selecting water as "the one" in the many. One reason might be its observed presence and need in all living things, since early cultures often saw *all* things as alive in some way. (E.g. the Australian Aborigines believe Ayers Rock is "alive" and "spiritual.") This belief that all matter is alive is called *hylozoism* (*hyle* = matter, *zoe* = life).

Another reason for selecting water might have been the observation that water is *flexible*: it exists in three states, solid (ice), liquid, and gas (vapor); thus the process of rarefaction and condensation could be seen as explaining how water became what seem to be other things. Earth would be further-condensed ice and fire further-rarefied vapor.

Air (= more-rarefied water)
⬆
Steam (= rarefied water)
⬆
Liquid water
⬇
Ice (= condensed water)
⬇
Earth (= more-condensed water)

The obvious problem with Thales' answer is that water is not sufficiently flexible or universal to account for *everything*.

(1) For one thing, it does not seem to account for mind and thought, or spirits and gods. Thales also said that **"all things are full of gods,"** but he did not say that gods were water or that water was a god. The two kinds of explanation, material and spiritual, or what we might call scientific and religious, are both there but without being brought into any relationship. But if they are both about reality and if reality is truly *one*, they *must* be.

(2) And even as a purely material explanation, water seems to be just one thing among many, not the one in all the many. It has an opposite: fire. It destroys fire and fire destroys it

Little is known with certainty about Thales' life, but there are many perhaps-mythical anecdotes. Many of the biographical anecdotes about the Greek philosophers come from the Roman Diogenes Laertius' gossipy *Lives of Eminent Philosphers.* (D)

(1) Thales was on every list of the fabled "Seven Sages" of ancient Greece.

(2) On the basis of old Babylonian tables of the orbits of the sun and moon, he correctly predicted the year of a solar eclipse.

(3) Herodotus says that "once when King Croessus was at a loss how to take his army across a river where there was no bridge, Thales switched the course of the river, diverting the uncrossable river into two shallower, crossable channels.

(4) "While a woman servant was leading him through the fields by night in order that he might observe the stars, he tumbled into a ditch; whereupon the woman, as she helped him out, remarked, 'How can you expect to know all about the heavens, Thales, when you can't know what lies right under your feet?'" (D)

(5) Aristotle tells us that "When people began mocking him, insinuating that his philosophy was of no practical use, he . . . predicted a large olive crop . . . he bought up all the olive presses cheaply. . . . when the time arrived and there was a sudden demand, he rented them out on his own terms, making large profits." (See? If philosophers really wanted to fill their wallets instead of their wisdom, they could.)

(6) "He held that there was no difference between life and death. 'Why, then, don't you kill yourself?' someone asked. 'Because there is no difference,' Thales replied." (D) The same story is told about some of the later Stoic philosophers.

(7) "When asked what is most difficult, he replied, 'To know oneself'; and when asked what is easiest, he replied, 'To give advice to others.'" (D)

(8) "Having learned geometry from the Egyptians, he was the first person to describe a right angled triangle in a circle, and in honor of his discovery he sacrificed an ox." (D) (Would any modern mathematician do that?)

(9) "On being asked why he did not become a father, he answered that it was because he was fond of children . . . when his mother exhorted him to marry, he said, 'It is not yet time,' and afterwards, when she was again pressing him earnestly, he said, 'It is no longer time.'" (D) (Again, this story is also told of some of the Stoics.) He said: "God is the most ancient of all things, for He had no birth; the world is the most beautiful of all things, for it is the work of God." (D)

(10) "When asked how men might live most virtuously and justly, he said: 'Never do ourselves what we blame in others.'" (D) (This is probably the single most universal and cross-cultural ethical principle in the world.)

Selected Bibliography:

God and Philosophy, chapter 1, by Etienne Gilson

10. Anaximander (610–546 B.C.)

Because no philosopher answers every question, subsequent philosophers arise to give improved answers. Thales' successors improved on Thales in many ways:

(1) by finding more flexible, more universal candidates for "the one";

(2) by giving better and more explicit *reasons* for their "one";

(3) by explaining why many things don't appear to be "the one" by explaining the mechanism of change by which this "one" becomes "the many"; and

(4) by asking more, and more clearly distinguished, questions, by adding the other three of "the four causes."

These are 4 of the most basic criteria by which to judge philosophical explanations: (1) universality, (2) rationality, (3) explaining more of experience, "saving the appearances," and (4) improving the questions and making new, needed distinctions.

Anaximander, who lived in the same time (born 611 or 610 B.C.) and place (Miletus) as Thales, picked up Thales' offensive rebound, so to speak, and shot again. Thus began the nature of the history of philosophy as "the great conversation," or dialog down the centuries.

Anaximander's answer to Thales' question was *to apeiron,* "the infinite."

Infinity was not a positive perfection to the ancient Greeks, as it is in Jewish and Christian theology. Even the Greeks' gods were finite, not infinite, except in longevity. For "infinite" means "not-limited"; and everything good, true, or beautiful that we can imagine has a limit, especially works of art. On the level of spatial imagination as distinct from abstract conception, "infinity" means simply "matter without form," a kind of shapeless blob or pure potentiality without actual determination; a "whatever."

Anaximander's answer was a better one than Thales', however, (1) because it avoided the main problem with Thales' answer: that if "the one" were anything specific like water, it would annihilate all other elements. (2) Anaximander's "infinite" also explained more data. It explained what was common to opposites like fire and water. It was more universal, more flexible, than water, which has a finite form. It was not just one thing among many.

"The infinite" was (1) externally unbounded, unlike Thales' water, which was apparently bounded by some things outside itself (fire, earth, and air) and (2) internally unbounded, because whatever is able to take on opposite forms like fire and water must be itself indeterminate in form. It was potentially all things by being actually none of them.

But Anaximander's answer had two problems. (1) Like the word "whatever," it seemed to say nothing. It was a purely negative concept: *not*-finite. That may be what it's *not*; but what *is* it? And (2) it did not explain the process by which finite things came

to be out of "the infinite." At least Thales could explain how other things came to be from water: by condensation and rarefaction.

An interesting extra: on the basis of finding fish fossils in inland quarries, Anaximander speculated that humanity had somehow evolved from these lower forms of life: history's earliest known version of the theory of evolution.

11. Anaximenes (585–525 B.C.)

(You think you'll have trouble distinguishing all those names beginning with "Anax"? Just wait till you get to Anaxagoras!)

Anaximenes' answer to Thales' question ("What is everything?") was *air.*

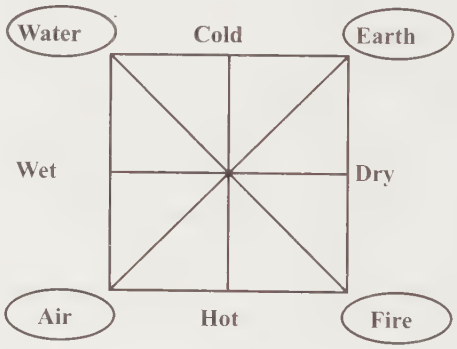
The two Greek words *psyche* ("life" or "soul") and, *pneuma* ("air" or "breath") were often used interchangeably. The same identification is true in ancient Hebrew: *ruah'* means "air" or "wind," but also "breath" or "life," and "soul" or "spirit."*).* Anaximenes shows this connection in his one surviving fragment: **"As our souls, being air, hold us together, so breath and air embrace the entire universe."**

Anaximenes' "air" seems to combine the desirable features of both Thales' "water" and Anaximander's "infinite."

For (1) it is more indeterminate than Thales' water *and* more determinate than Anaximander's "infinite."

(2) It also explains the process of generation of the many from the one by the condensation and rarefaction of air to produce the other three of the "four elements" of ancient Greek chemistry by the four possible combinations of the two basic qualities. This was a primitive approximation to modern chemistry with its three states of matter plus energy:

Earth: cold and dry (solid matter)
Air: hot and wet (gaseous matter)
Fire: hot and dry (energy)
Water: cold and wet (liquid matter)



But Anaximenes' solution has the same problem as Thales': it seems too specific, too concrete, to be the universal "one." Shankara's "one," reached by a very different route, seems philosophically more tenable, since infinite *thought* (Brahman) can (mentally) be all things while remaining itself.

One could criticize Anaximenes for *lacking* both the desirable qualities of his predecessors, for he lacked both Thales' originality and Anaximander's abstract universality.

We can see the structure of the history of philosophy in miniature among these first three thinkers. It is what Hegel would later call a "dialectical" process: a three-step, waltz-like movement from a "thesis" to its opposite "antithesis" and then to their reconciliation in a higher "synthesis" which preserves and combines the best features of both of the previous, opposite stages by attaining a higher point of view.

This seems to be the process by which all humans learn all things. (1) When we are first born, we do not make distinctions among things. As Aristotle says, "the young child calls all men 'father.'" (2) Then, with growth, we make distinctions, we discriminate, we make choices, we become specialists. (3) Finally, with maturity we see both the whole and the part in structural relationships. Young children and old people are generalists and contemplative philosophers; middle-aged people are pragmatic specialists.

Our relationship with our parents also passes through these three stages. (1) Young children feel a natural unity, as if they are a kind of extension of the womb. (2) Teenagers naturally rebel to achieve independence and individuality. (3) And adult children are able to relate to their parents with more understanding and deeper love than they could in stage (1), because they have gone through stage (2). Jacques Maritain calls this principle: "Distinguish to unite," and he also applies it to the history of philosophy.

A good liberal arts education also passes through these three stages. It begins with a general survey of the whole of human knowledge. It proceeds to some specialization, a "major." Finally, it integrates this specialty with the whole of human knowledge. It becomes philosophical.

This structure can be seen in the history of philosophy.

The first 3 philosophers we have studied show it: Thales = the thesis, Anaximander = the antithesis, and Anaximenes = the synthesis.

The 3 stages of Greek philosophy in general show it too. (1) The earliest philosophers are called the "cosmological philosophers" since they focus their questions on objective reality or the cosmos. (2) Next come "the anthropological philosophers," the Sophists and Socrates, who ignore the cosmos and ask human, practical, ethical questions. (3) Finally, Plato and Aristotle give us philosophy's first two comprehensive syntheses of both dimensions.

The history of philosophy as a whole also shows this structure. (1) Ancient and medieval philosophy is objective, like a child wondering about the world. Even its anthropological and ethical thinking is objective (e.g. unlike modern thought it almost always embraces a "natural law" morality). (2) Modern philosophy turns to the human subject, like a teenager wondering about him/herself. Unlike premodern thought, it tends toward skepticism and subjectivism. (3) We have not yet emerged into an adult synthesis of these two stages. Perhaps this book can stimulate one of its readers to do that.

12. Pythagoras (580–500 B.C.)

Pythagoras was (a) the founder of a religious community and school, (b) a scientist, mathematician, geometer, and astronomer, (c) a Utopian political planner, and (d) a philosopher. These four things (religion, science, politics, and philosophy) were not only connected but almost identical in his mind.*

Pythagoras was born around 580 B.C. on the Greek island of Samos and traveled to Egypt to study all four of these things under Egyptian priests. Later, he moved his school to Crotona, a Greek city in southern Italy. But its inhabitants believed him to be a dangerous wizard with magical powers, including a golden thigh, the power of bilocating (being in two different places at the same time), and turning a wild bear into a vegetarian simply by talking to it. (Eat your heart out, Gandhi!) According to Diogenes Laertius, he claimed to be the son of the god Mercury, who gave him the gift of remembering all his previous reincarnations, both in the underworld and in this world, including transmigrations into plants and animals. The members of his scientific-and-religious-order sold all their private property to be owned in common. For their first five years, his students were forbidden to either see or speak to Pythagoras, but could only listen to his nightly lectures. There were about 600 per night, who counted themselves privileged to hear these lectures. His authority was so great that the final answer to all questions was *ipse dixit* ("he himself has said it"), a saying which (in Latin) became a cliché for unquestionable authoritarianism. He wrote nothing, and taught his deepest esoteric secrets only to an inner ring of the initiated, including his plans for a radical, utopian *polis* (city-state)—an enterprise Plato would later make famous in his *Republic.*

The suspicious town finally rioted, burned down his school, murdered some of his students and exiled the others. (Philosophy and politics seldom mix well. The only major philosopher in Western history who was also a major political success was Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic Roman emperor.) Diogenes says that Pythagoras escaped the fire by

* Almost always, we moderns distinguish and separate far more than the ancients did. E.g. we think in terms of 'the separation of church and state,' or 'the distinction between philosophy and science.' Some even speak of a *conflict* or *tension* between religion and science. But for Pythagoras, mathematics was a religious discipline! It purified the soul. We deeply misunderstand the ancients if we read into their broader terms our narrower, separated modern meanings. E.g. when we hear Aristotle define Man as "the rational animal," we may think of an ape with a computer. But 'reason' meant to the ancients not just calculation but also understanding, contemplation, practical know-how, technological expertise, artistic invention, moral conscience, and aesthetic appreciation.

walking over a human bridge made of his students, and ran away, but "he was caught and killed when he came to a place full of beans. He stopped there, saying that it was better to be caught than to trample on the beans . . . and so he was murdered." He thought of beans as sacred, and he didn't think his life was worth a hill of beans.

Diogenes also notes that "he forbade his disciples to eat beans, because, as they were flatulent, they greatly partook of animal properties."

An alternative explanation for the obsession with beans is that the word "bean" may have been a slang term for "testicle."

(How clear-headed and reliable Diogenes is can be judged by the following typical quotation: "Aristotle says, in his treatise on beans, that Pythagoras enjoined his disciples to abstain from beans either because they resemble some part of the human body, or because they are like the gates of hell (for they are the only plants without parts), or because they dry up other plants, or because they are used in elections in oligarchical governments.")

Pythagoras' religion sounds to us like something invented by Monty Python. It aimed at mystical purification through training in mathematics, and included initiation rites such as remaining underground away from sunlight for years; abstaining from beans, meat, cooked food, and drinks other than water; and a dramatic exhibition in a dark room, by a sudden flash of artificial lightening, of—The Sacred Grain Stalk. He taught that the air is filled with dead, disembodied souls who send dreams and prophecies to mortals. Some of his commandments were: "Do not throw stones into fountains," "Do not sit on a bushel measure," "Do not urinate in the direction of the sun," and "Adore the wind." (One suspects some confusion between the sun and the wind in these last two proverbs.)

However, some of the *philosophical* ideas in his religion were influential, mainly because they were adopted by Plato: that (a) a man is his soul, not his body; (b) the soul is immortal; (c) the body (*soma*) is a tomb (*sema*); (d) the soul reincarnates; and (e) learning is really remembering what we already know in the depths of the unconscious and/or a previous life.

Pythagoras' "Big Idea" was that **all things are numbers.** He seems to have meant by this two different things (1) that numbers are the key to understanding everything and (2) that all things are in fact numbers, or made of numbers, rather than matter, such as Thales' 'water' or Anaximenes' 'air,' so that the essential nature of reality is its quantitative form. He did not distinguish these two meanings, the first being epistemological and the second metaphysical; but we must do this to evaluate him, for the first has proved fruitful and the second "fruity."

(1) Pythagoras' discovery that nature obeyed mathematical laws, that math was the very "language of nature," was one of the most important discoveries in the history of science.

He arrived at this generalization from a number of separate experiences, according to later perhaps-legendary stories:

(a) Struck by the different tones emerging from a blacksmith's shop, he discovered that the heavier the hammer, the lower the lower pitch of the tone. He knew that weight could be mathematically measured, on scales, and concluded that tone could also, and could be correlated with weight through the common "language" of number.

(b) He already knew that changes in pitch were caused by pressing down on a vibrating string of a lute or by blowing through holes at different lengths in a flute, but he added the discovery that if one string is twice the length of the other, the result is an octave; if one is 1½ times longer than the other (ratio 3:2), the result was another harmonious interval, the fifth (do-sol); and if the ratio was 4:3 it is still another harmonious interval, the fourth (do-fa or sol-do). Thus number was the key to music.

(c) The distances between earth and the 5 visible planets were calculated, fairly accurately by trigonometry, to follow the same "musical" mathematical intervals. This led Pythagoras to the conclusion that the cosmos was a gigantic musical instrument, designed to play "the music of the (heavenly) spheres." Asked why we did not hear this music, he replied that we are too close to it, like the blacksmith who no longer notices the sounds he hears all day in his shop. But if we attained a contemplative distance from it, we might actually hear it. This was one of the goals of his religious discipline: to purify the soul by the contemplation of pure mathematics so as to hear the music that is the song of the cosmos. It was said that Pythagoras heard this music just once during his lifetime.

(2) Pythagoras then generalized his discovery to **"*everything* is number."** In fact he taught that **"things *are* numbers."**

This seems to be an obvious case of "reductionism," which is the fallacy of reducing a complex reality to only one aspect or dimension of it. But it is also a step forward in two ways:

For one thing, it goes beyond the Milesians in recognizing a second fundamental dimension of things: form, and not just matter. Though number is only *quantitative* form, it is *form* and not merely matter. Material things are not just material!

It is also a step forward in the ability to *abstract* this formal dimension of number from its various material contents. At primitive stages of their development, languages often have no abstract number words but only concrete number words, which indicate the things counted in the same word as the counting, like "two-*slices* of bread" or "five-*head* of cattle." Pythagoras first elevated numbers to nouns rather than mere adjectives. This was an essential step in the development of pure mathematics. Although it is reductionism to say "*things are* (only) *numbers*," it is not reductionism but abstraction to say that "*numbers are* (a special, non-material kind of) *things* (entities)."

Pythagoras' mathematical reductionism insisted on classifying *everything* mathematically. Since everything was number, and since numbers are either odd or even, everything was either odd or even, thus reducing *all* pairs to pairs-*of-numbers*. It was also the first philosophical rationalization for the prejudice against women and left-handed people. This was his list:

Odd	Even
Limited	Unlimited
Good	Bad
Male	Female
Active	Passive
Light	Dark
Right	Left
Straight	Crooked
Square	Oblong
Rest	Motion

Yet, as in Heraclitus (chapter 13) and as in Taoism's Yin and Yang (chapter 6), these opposite Pythagorean principles are in harmony as well as opposition, like bow and string on a lyre, and contribute to the cosmic "music of the spheres."

13. Heraclitus (535–475 B.C.)

Like two other, later philosophers (Pascal and Nietzsche), "Heraclitus the Obscure" deliberately wrote in aphorisms or maxims. They are often paradoxical, puzzling, and/or countercultural. He wrote "intentionally in an obscure style in order that only those who were able might comprehend it." (D) He does not argue from premises to conclusions; we do not find in him the logical indicators "if . . . then . . ." which are so typical of later philosophers. For he asks us not to argue but to "look" and "see" nature in a different and even shocking way.

He was apparently a pessimist, a misanthropist, and a snob. "While he was young he used to say that he knew nothing but when he had grown up, he then used to affirm that he knew everything." (D) (Exactly the opposite of Socrates!) When the citizens of his native Ephesus asked him to share his wisdom by drawing up a constitution for the city, he refused, saying **"The Ephesians deserve to be hanged."** He had no teacher and no students. Instead of teaching, he played dice with boys in the temple of Diana (Artemis); and when adults dared to watch, he said, **"Why so surprised, you scoundrels? This is a better enterprise than your politics!"** He became a hermit and lived in self-imposed exile in the mountains, eating grass and roots. This gave him dropsy. When his physicians "did not understand him, he shut himself up in a stable for oxen and covered himself with cow dung, hoping to cause the wet to evaporate from him by the warmth that this produced. And as he did himself no good in this way, he died." (D) (Students are invited to compose an appropriate epitaph.)

His 124 short aphorisms that have been preserved speak to all five of the fundamental areas of philosophy which Aristotle later clearly distinguished: (1) cosmology (philosophy of nature), (2) metaphysics (philosophy of being), (3) epistemology (philosophy of knowledge), (4) anthropology (philosophy of human nature), and (5) ethics.

(1) His cosmology centers on the "big idea" that **"everything changes"** ("*panta rhei,*" "everything flows,"), as Plato put it, or, in his own words, that **"you cannot step into the same river twice, for other and yet other waters are ever flowing on."**

(a) He said that everything is made of **fire** rather than water, 'the infinite,' air, or number; thus the cosmos is a gigantic furnace, which "**has not been made by any god or man, but it always has been, is, and will be: an ever-living fire, kindling itself and extinguishing itself by fixed measure.**" "**There is exchange of all things for fire and of fire for all things, as there is of wares for gold and gold for wares.**"

What did he mean by "fire"? It was apparently not merely literal physical fire, but neither was it a mere symbol for change or conflict, for it was the power or driving force or energy of the whole physical universe. It is another example (see above, the footnote on page 54 concerning 'reason' and page 52 concerning 'air' or 'spirit') of an ancient term which has not yet broken up into its two modern halves, here the literal vs. the symbolic and also the physical vs. the spiritual. The ancient term thus carries the suggestive power of both senses at once, as no modern term can do.

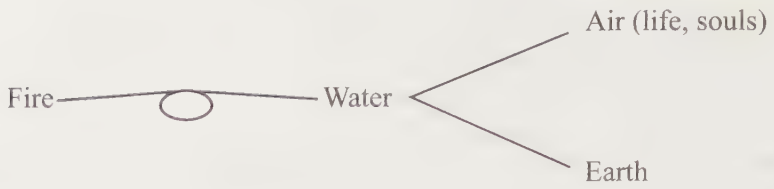
(b) He also pictured the cosmos as **war**: **"War is both father and king of all"** and **"all things come to pass through the compulsion of strife. . . . Homer was wrong in saying, 'Would that strife might perish from among gods and men,' for if that were to occur, then all things would cease to exist."** Harmony comes from strife: "**that which is in conflict with itself is in harmony with itself. There is concord in tension, as with bow and lyre**." This conflict is vertical as well as horizontal: **"Gods and men: living in each other's death, dying in each other's life."**

Heraclitus was the first philosopher to struggle with the puzzle of change: how can a thing change (from being "the same old thing" to being something *not* the same but new) *and yet remain the same thing*? For if it is not the same thing, it is not *that thing* that changes. Thus to say "x changes" seems logically self-contradictory to the mind. Yet everything in nature, as it appears to our senses, seems to change. (In fact, minds change too.)

Heraclitus accepted the testimony of our experience and embraced paradox in the reason. His opposite number, Parmenides, would make the opposite choice, embracing the consequences of logical reasoning even though they contradicted experience, in saying that being (what-is, reality) cannot really change, even though it appears to.

(2) Though Heraclitus taught that all *things* change, there is also a "law" or *logos* of change which is an unchanging abstract rational order or formula exemplified in all changing concrete things; a formula of change itself; an invisible but intelligible pattern in all visible changes in nature. "**All things come to pass in accordance with this logos**." Newton's F=MA or Einstein's $E=MC^2$ are essentially only much more sophisticated versions of Heraclitus' idea. Heraclitus' formula for the interchange of nature's fundamental elements was that "**there is exchange of all things for fire and of fire for all things**" and that "**water comes into existence out of earth and souls out of water**." This seems hopelessly confused compared with Newton or Einstein, but it was really the first attempt to formulate the *logos* of nature in terms both material in content, like the Milesians, and formal in form(ula), like the Pythagoreans.

Since everything changed into its opposite, fire and water exchange places. Water, in turn, is transformed into the two opposites, air and earth. Thus Heraclitus substituted a dynamic order among the four elements for a static one.



Logos, the word Heraclitus used for the unchanging universal formula of all change, is one of the richest words in any language, and has at least three fundamental meanings: (I) essence, nature, structure, meaning, order, intelligibility, formula, form, law, or cause (real reason); (II) mind, thought, truth, intelligence, understanding, reason, knowledge, science, or explanation; and (III) word, speech, language, discourse, communication, revelation.

Gorgias the Sophist (chapter 22), a century later, was a complete "nihilist" ("nihil" is Latin for "nothing") and skeptic. He denied all three *logoi* (above) in teaching that

(I) nothing really exists,

(II) even if it did, it could never be known, and

(III) even if it were known, it could never be communicated.

Heraclitus conceived the *logos* as governing all human affairs as well as all changes in nature. "**For all human laws are nourished by the one divine law, which prevails as far as it will, and suffices for all things**." Heraclitus wrote: "**Listen not to me but to the Logos**." An excellent principle for all philosophy, science, religion and politics!

(3) Heraclitus' epistemology, like Pythagoras', was esoteric and elitist rather than exoteric and egalitarian. His attitude toward human intelligence was highly skeptical (at least for human beings not named 'Heraclitus'). He wrote, "**Although the Logos is eternally valid, yet men are unable to understand it . . . although the Logos is common to all, most men live as if each of them had a private intelligence (logos) of their own." "Human nature has no real understanding; only the divine nature has it."**

Heraclitus' point here, as distinct from Heraclitus himself, is one of intellectual humility. For insofar as it means that appearance and reality are very different, and that therefore "**unless you expect the unexpected, you will never find it [truth], for it is hard to discover**," this is a truth essential to all intellectual progress, and it would be the driving force behind the philosophy of Socrates. It is Hamlet's lesson to Horatio, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy."

(4) Heraclitus' anthropology moves between (a) the mystical and (b) the materialistic. (a) On the one hand, "**you could not discover the limits of soul, even if you traveled by every path in order to do so**." (b) But on the other hand, "**soul is the least corporeal of things . . . soul is the vaporization out of which everything else is composed**" and "**a drunken man stumbles because his soul is moist**."

We wonder whether this means that souls are really water or that matter is really soul. Is Heraclitus lowering spirit to matter or raising matter to spirit? But when we ask this question we are imposing a later, modern distinction on a pre-modern mind, whose concept of matter is more spiritual, *and* whose concept of soul is more material, than ours. This "materialistic or mystical?" dilemma is a distinctively modern one, or at least a post-Platonic one. For Plato would be the first thinker to sharply distinguish these two things: matter and mind, body and soul, the physical and the spiritual. That distinction, which has come to live in the very foundation of our thinking, has given us new clarity and distinctions but at the price of no longer understanding the primitive unity out of which the two halves of the distinction came.

(5) Heraclitus drew the logical consequences of these theoretical positions for practical ethics. If all things are relative (for us, at least, if not for a god), then so are values: **"To the god all things are beautiful, good, and right; men, on the other hand, deem some things right and others wrong."** In other words, as Polonius says in "Hamlet," "There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

A century later, Plato would find an alternative to Heraclitus's metaphysics of "everything flows" in his "theory of (eternal) Forms," because of his determination to find an alternative to ethical relativism, which was being taught by the Sophists. One's metaphysics always determines one's ethics. Practice always presupposes theory.

14. Xenophanes (570–480 B.C.)

Xenophanes of Colophon was the first philosophical theologian. He reasoned his way to a clear monotheism and to a concept of the nature of God that stood out sharply against the anthropomorphism and polytheism of his contemporaries.

He spent most of his life in exile from his native city, and lived to a very old age. (Both of these features were quite common among ancient philosophers.) He was Parmenides' teacher. But while Parmenides was a monist, Xenophanes was a mono*theist*, teaching a single God *transcendent* to the world of things rather than Parmenides' pantheistic "One" which *was* all things. His ideas may have influenced Socrates, who was a far more influential monotheist among the Greek polytheists, and who paid for it with his life. (See chapter 23.)*

Xenophanes' critique of anthropomorphism led him to the logical conclusion that God is in no way inferior to man, and therefore must have all of the following attributes:

(1) **God is one and supreme . . . not at all like mortals.**
(2) **It is the whole (of God) that sees, the whole that thinks, the whole that hears.**
(3) **Without effort he sets everything in motion by the thought of his mind.**
(4) **He always abides in the selfsame place, not moving at all.**

This entailed a scathing critique of polytheism and of its human origin:

If oxen or lions had hands which enabled them to draw and paint pictures as men do, they would portray their gods as having bodies like their own: horses would portray them as horses, and oxen as oxen.

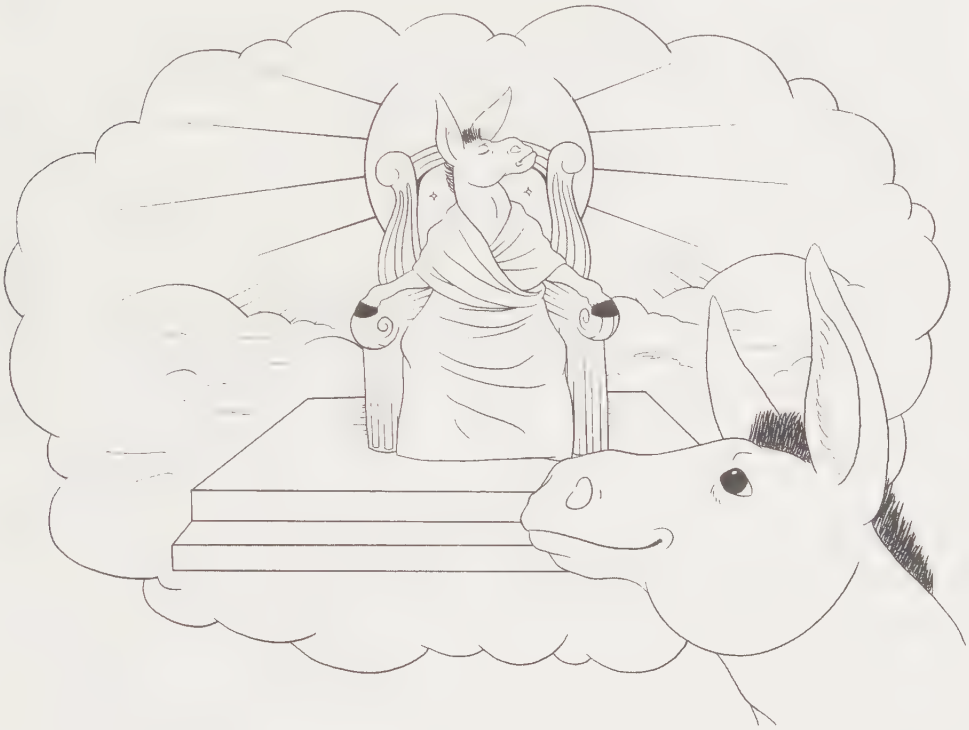
Ethiopians have gods with snub noses and black hair, Thracians have gods with gray eyes and red hair.

Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods all sorts of actions which when done by men are disreputable and deserving of blame: such lawless deeds as theft, adultery, and deception.

No man has existed, nor will exist, who has plain knowledge about the gods... yet everybody thinks he knows.

* I will not further define "monotheism," "polytheism," "anthropomorphism," "monism," "pantheism," or "transcendence." Look them up! Always have a dictionary nearby when you read good books. Expanding your vocabulary is a simple and powerful way to expand not just your knowledge but your mind. For minds are only as big as their ideas, and ideas live only in idea-houses, which are words.

This last saying is a perfect description of Socrates' thinking, and the one before it is essentially Plato's critique of Homer in the "Republic."



15. Parmenides (515–450 B.C.)

Parmenides was influenced by Xenophanes' monotheism. But whereas Xenophanes is a monotheist, Parmenides is a pantheist, or rather a monist. Xenophanes taught that there is only one God, and that God transcends the many, changing creatures. Parmenides taught that there is only one reality (which he does not call God, but "Being," but it has Godlike properties such as perfection, unity, and unchangeable eternity) and that there simply *is* nothing else: no many, no change. Whereas Xenophanes denied the existence of all other gods but one, Parmenides denied the existence of all other *beings* but one.

Parmenides is the polar opposite of Heraclitus. For Heraclitus, "everything flows." For Parmenides, *nothing* flows. Change is an illusion, and so is plurality. The only reality is Being, which is single and changeless.

The contrast between Heraclitus and Parmenides shaped the whole history of Western philosophy; for both Plato and Aristotle, the two most influential philosophers who ever lived, had to find ways to mediate this extreme contrast and synthesize the insights of these two predecessors. Plato accepted both philosophies as true, but true of two different worlds, or levels of reality, the Forms and matter; while Aristotle joined them as the formal and material aspects of the one world.

Parmenides was born in Elea in southern Italy. He was probably influenced by the Pythagoreans. Plato says he visited Athens when he was very old and Socrates was very young (around 450 B.C.). Plato's "Parmenides" is the only dialog in which Socrates *loses* the argument (about Parmenides' "One"), to an older and wiser Parmenides.

Parmenides' four-page poem is the earliest complete treatise of philosophy in the Western world (unless we count "Ecclesiastes" as philosophy). In it, a goddess takes him on a journey to Heaven and reveals the logic of his argument about Being being only one.

Some say the poetry is just window-dressing, clothing or makeup on a logical argument for the benefit of a religious audience. Others say it shows that Parmenides was really a mystic and not merely a logician, and did not expect his readers to accept his conclusion without a mystical experience like his. Still others say Parmenides was both a logician *and* a mystic.

In any case, the rest of the Greeks, unlike Shankara's Hindus, simply could not believe this monistic conclusion. They were too convinced of the reality of the empirical world, and too interested in it, to call it illusion. Exploring the outer world, they would be the inventors of the empirical sciences, while India would explore the inner world and invent the yogas, the inner sciences.

Parmenides' single "big idea" can be expressed very simply: **Only Being is; non-being cannot be.** Only one thing exists, and it is not *a* being, a thing. It is simply **Being.**

His argument is apparently infallibly logical. If anything *other than* Being existed, it would be non-being; but it is self-contradictory to say that non-being *is*.

Another way to put the argument is this: If there were anything besides Being, it would have to be different from Being *by something*; but that 'something' could not be Being (for then it would not be *different* from Being), so it would have to be non-being. But non-being cannot do anything, or make any difference. Therefore nothing differentiates. There are no real differences. Everything is one.

This metaphysics entails an epistemology. Parmenides' metaphysical monism is the verdict of pure reason. The senses, on the other hand, tell us that things are many and changing. Parmenides chooses to follow reason rather than the senses. And since at the heart of reason is the law of non-contradiction, he cannot accept both of these two apparently *contradictory* testimonies, that of reason and that of sensation. His fundamental epistemological principle is that **it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be,** or, alternatively translated, **thought and being are the same.** So his epistemology is pure Rationalism with no concession to Empiricism. The same monistic conclusion was reached by Shankara in India, centuries before, not on the basis of rational argument but on the basis of mystical experience.

Parmenides' point can be put in the single word *esti,* **"it is."** Greek does not have pronouns distinct from verbs, as English does, so *esti* can mean either "is" or "it is." Parmenides' point is that *there is no "it" separate from "is."* There is just "is," or being. And since "becoming" is other than "being" (for a thing "becomes," or changes, only when it *no longer is* what it once was), becoming lacks this "is," lacks being. Change does not really exist.

Parmenides' words are:

Never shall it be proven that non-being is.

The one way, *that it is and cannot not-be*, is the way of truth. The other way, *that it is not and that non-being must be,* cannot be held by the mind, for you cannot know non-being and cannot express it.

(Thus Parmenides affirms the three *logoi* that Gorgias was to deny: being, knowing, and speaking. Being can be, can be known, and can be said; non-being cannot.)

There remains, then, but one word by which to express the (true) road: 'is.'

Being has no beginning and will never be destroyed. It is whole, still, and without end. It neither was nor will be, it simply is. . . . How and whence could it have grown? I shall not allow you to say or think of it as coming from non-being, for it is impossible to say or think that non-being is. Besides, what could have stirred up activity so that it should arise from non-being later rather than earlier?

Thus our decision must be made in these terms: Is or Is Not.

Accordingly, all the usual notions that mortals accept and rely on as if true—coming-to-be and perishing, being *and* non-being, change of place and variegated shades of color—these are nothing more than names.

Our evaluation of Parmenides finds one large plus and three large minuses.

Even if we reject Parmenides' metaphysics of pure monism *and* his epistemology of pure rationalism, we must accept his fundamental principle that the law of non-contradiction is a law of all being, not just of thought—unless thought is neither *about* real being nor an example of something that really has being. This principle is presupposed by all rational philosophy, science, and even common sense. What Pythagoras discovered as true about number—that not just mind but nature really speaks the language of mathematics—Parmenides insisted was true about logic—that all reality speaks its language.

Therefore if Parmenides' conclusion is false, his opponent must find a logical mistake in his argument. This is exactly what Plato and Aristotle would try to do. Instead of choosing between the two "ways" in Parmenides' poem, "the way of opinion," which is the common sense empiricism of the masses, and "the way of truth," which is the rational mysticism of the philosopher, they tried to "save (explain, validate) the appearances" by their philosophy rather than ignoring or invalidating them.

Three fundamental points of critique emerge, one practical, one logical, and one metaphysical.

(1) In practice, Parmenides was also a Pythagorean mathematician and scientist. He wrote also about astronomy and biology. He expended much thought on the world. But if his argument is sound, the world of many changing things cannot be real. Why bother?

I know a man who believed in Mary Baker Eddy's religion of "Christian Science" (which is neither Christian nor science), which taught that matter was unreal; yet he taught physical chemistry at a prestigious college. He began his courses by saying that "I believe that matter is only a dream. This course is about the amazingly consistent properties of that dream." Why bother?

(2) The logic of Parmenides' monism seems to contain a built-in self-contradiction. Even if, as Parmenides taught, change and plurality are illusion, no such illusion ought to appear at all on the hypothesis that all is one. If all is one and there are no real distinctions, then how can there be a real distinction between truth and illusion? And if there is no real change, how can one change his mind from the illusion of the masses to the truth of Parmenides' philosophy?

(3) Finally, metaphysics can make room for both change and changelessness by making a key distinction. (Whenever two parts of the data seem to contradict each other, the most likely explanation is usually that the apparent contradiction comes from confusing two distinct aspects of the data which were not clearly distinguished.) If we make a distinction between two meanings of "being"—essence, or *what* a thing is, and existence,

or *that* it is—we can explain both change and changelessness. Essences do not change—redness does not become non-redness—but existence does: red things come into existence and go out of existence. But this distinction, between essence and existence, would not become clear until centuries later, especially in Aquinas.

16. Zeno of Elea (490–430 B.C.)

Zeno, another Eleatic (from Elea), was contemporary with and a disciple of Parmenides, and defended his master's anti-commonsensical philosophy by four famous "paradoxes." Actually, there are six of them, and they are not really *paradoxes*. Paradoxes are apparent contradictions which are not really contradictions. Zeno's "paradoxes" are *reductio ad absurdum* ("reduction to absurdity") arguments, in which Zeno tried to show that common sense's belief in real change and plurality can be reduced to, or shown to logically entail, conclusions that are logically self-contradictory and thus absurd.

These arguments are similar in purpose and logical strategy, though not in content, to the four "antinomies of pure reason" that the 18th-century German philosopher Kant would make famous. Kant's four sets of contradictory conclusions tried to show the impossible results of trusting "pure reason," or metaphysics that claims to know anything *beyond* empirical experience; that if you metaphysicize, your thought will reach absurdities. But Zeno would try to prove that if you do *not* believe in Parmenides' metaphysics, if you believe in sensory appearances instead, you will reach logical absurdities; that logic disproved the testimony of the senses.

Zeno's four puzzles are as follows:

(1) **If things are many, they must be finite in number. For they must be as many as they are, neither more nor less. . . . On the other hand, if things are many, they must be infinite in number, for there are always other things between any that exist, and between these there are always others. (Therefore things are not many.)**

(2) **If a thing exists, then either it has magnitude or it does not. Say it has no magnitude. Then if added to another existing thing it would not make the latter any larger. . . . It follows that the thing added is nothing. (Thus) if anything lacks magnitude it does not exist. . . . But by the same reasoning, each part of a part must have magnitude, and the same is true of each lesser part . . . without limit: no part, however small, can be the ultimate part. (Therefore different things do not exist.)**

(3) **If anything is moving, it must be moving either in the place in which it is or in the place which it is not. But it cannot move in the place in which it is (for the place in which it is at any moment is of the same size as itself and hence allows no**

room to move in); and it cannot move in the place in which it is not (for it does not exist in the place in which it is not). Therefore movement is impossible.

If at each instant the flying arrow is at rest, when does it move?

(4) **If place existed, it would have to be in something, i.e. in a place (et cetera, et cetera ad infinitum). (Therefore place does not exist.)**

Zeno's most famous paradoxes are two others, as reported by Aristotle, which are arguments against motion:

The first of his arguments denies that motion exists on the ground that a moving body would have to go half the distance before it could go the entire distance. (In other words, it is impossible to traverse an infinite number of points in a finite time. But is it? Is a point a *space*?)

The second is the so-called "Achilles" argument. It declares that even the swiftest runner will never overtake the slowest, because the pursuer must first reach the point from which the pursued has set out, so that the slower runner will always be some distance ahead. (Therefore motion does not exist.)

College professors may wake up their sleeping students by using Zeno's logic here to prove that they can never leave the room.

If any of the students are math majors, they may have learned the answers to Zeno's puzzles about motion from the Newtonian infinitesimal calculus, which allows us to calculate motion at a point. I will leave it up to you, the reader, to find these answers—but to find them you may first have to leave the room! Sometimes you have to live an answer before you can understand it.

Diogenes Laertius says that Zeno "had his head bent on one side . . . was thin, very tall, (and) had fat, flabby, weak legs." (D was probably describing his body, but perhaps he was describing his arguments.) D gives this account of his death: "He, wishing to put an end to the power of Nearches, the tyrant, was arrested . . . and when he was examined as to his accomplices . . . he named all the friends of the tyrant . . . and then he said that he wished to whisper something privately to the tyrant, and when he came near him he bit him and would not leave his hold until he was stabbed . . . it was his nose that he bit off." Another account says that it was the tyrant's ear, and that while being stabbed "he said to the bystanders, 'I marvel at your cowardice if you submit to be slaves of the tyrant out of fear of such pains as I am now enduring.' And at last he bit off his tongue and spit it at him; and the citizens immediately rushed forward and slew the tyrant with stones."

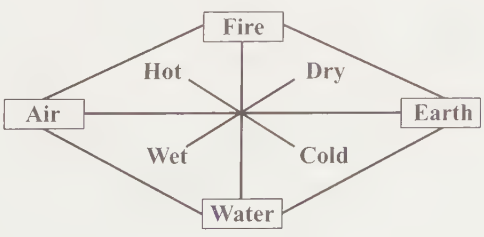
17. Empedocles (490–430 B.C.)

Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus are called "pluralists" because they denied that all things are one, either in the sense that they are all made of the same kind of stuff, as the Milesians taught, or in the sense that plurality is an illusion, as Parmenides and Zeno taught. Their answer to the famous "problem of the one and the many" is that "the one" itself is many.

Empedocles was a *qualitative pluralist* because he posited four different qualities (earth, air, fire, and water) as the ultimate constituents, or material causes, of all things. Anaxagoras (chapter 18) was also a qualitative pluralist because he posited the hidden presence of *all* qualities in all things. Democritus and Lucretius (chapters 19 & 20) were *quantitative pluralists* because they posited as the ultimate constituents of all things "atoms" that were identical except for quantitative size and shape.

Empedocles was a native of Sicily and a physician. He taught that reality is always composed of the "four elements" that were already commonly recognized by Greek cosmology: **earth, air, fire, and water**. He calls them the "roots" of all things. He is a pluralist because he does not reduce them all to one: either to water, like Thales, or to air, like Anaximenes, or to fire, like Heraclitus. Nor does he reduce everything to number, like Pythagoras, or to changeless Being, like Parmenides.

This cosmology of four elements is "primitive" if interpreted literally and scientifically. But pre-scientific cultures did not think in terms of our sharp distinction between the literal and the symbolic. This cosmology is not just ancient or Greek but cross-cultural and nearly universal. Even today something in us instinctively says "Yes!" to it if it is taken symbolically. For example, the popularity of "The Last Airbender" books is based on this cosmology. It is "natural" to us because these four elements are data taken from the most striking contrasts in our immediate experience. They were also explained as alternative combinations of two of the most striking qualities of matter, heat and moisture, as follows:



Also, these four are examples or symbols of the three states of matter (solid, gaseous, and liquid) plus energy (fire), so it is an inspired guess at basic chemistry, like Democritus' atomism.

In addition to these four *material* causes (what things are made of), Empedocles posited also two *efficient causes* (what made them or moved them), namely, cosmic **love and hate** (or "strife"), which combined and separated the four elements. Things combine when the universe obeys the maxim "Make love, not war." Things separate when it obeys the maxim "Make war, not love." (That was the maxim a medieval wife inscribed on the chastity belt of her husband when he went on the crusades.) Aristotle reports that "**Empedocles says that things are sometimes in motion and sometimes at rest: when Love is producing the One out of many and Strife is producing many out of One, things are in motion, but in the intervening periods they are at rest.**"

Aristotle, in the world's first history of philosophy (the first book of his *Metaphysics)*, classified all previous thinkers by which of the four causes they recognized: Thales first recognized material causes, Pythagoras formal causes, Empedocles efficient causes, and Anaxagoras (next chapter) final causes (purposes, ends, or goals), by positing "Mind" in the universe.

Love and Strife were for Empedocles thus a kind of primitive or poetic gravity and antigravity. We define love as a spiritual, or immaterial act, or choice, or will, or desire, or emotion, which cannot be quantified; while we define gravity as a physical force which can be quantified. We moderns have more clearly distinguished categories than the ancients, especially matter vs. spirit. As Descartes defined these two "clear and distinct ideas," matter takes up space and does not think while spirit thinks and does not takes up space. This is clearly progress, but it is also regress if we can no longer connect the different aspects of reality that we have more clearly distinguished. Thus we are surprised to see someone classify love as gravity or gravity as love, as Dante does in the last line of the "Divine Comedy," which speaks of "the love that moves the sun and the other stars." Who is more pitiable: the modern person who can no longer see the whole, or the premodern person who has not yet clearly distinguished the parts? A modern thinker like Descartes, who sees the human person as "a ghost in a machine" or a premodern thinker like Aristotle who sees the soul as the form of the body and the body as the matter of the soul?

Accepting Anaximander's notion of evolution (chapter 10), Empedocles also posited a means or mechanism by which it could have happened, which was essentially that of "natural selection" by random chance.

Like many modern biologists, Empedocles used this to explain even thought: **"It is by chance that men have come to have conscious thought."** Empedocles had a materialistic conception of thought (which is probably natural to a physician, whose attention is focused on bodies and on thought's dependence on bodies). He wrote: **"The heart**

dwells in a sea of blood which flows back and forth around it. That encircling blood is what men experience as thought."

Like the Pythagoreans, he also had a fear of beans. (Is there a Latin word for that?) He wrote: **"Wretches, utter wretches, keep your hands away from beans."** (Perhaps he thought of beans as children of the Supreme Bean?)

Reincarnation was also a part of Empedocles' cosmology. He wrote: **"In the past I have been a boy and a girl, a bush, a bird, and a dumb water-dwelling fish."** (It sounds fishy to me too.)

D says that Empedocles (and Plato too) were originally pupils of Pythagoras and that both were expelled from his school for revealing to the public Pythagoras' secret doctrines. D also says that Empedocles is believed to have committed suicide by leaping into the volcano of Mount Etna: "when he arrived at the crater of fire he leaped in and disappeared, wishing to establish a belief that he had become a god." (Matthew Arnold wrote a poem about this, "Empedocles on Aetna.") He had spoken of himself as "a deathless god," and he habitually wore royal purple robes, a gold girdle, and bronze slippers, carried a staff, and always had a train of attendants. He thought to prove to the world his divinity and immortality by throwing himself into the volcano, but the volcano had the last word: it threw back one of his bronze slippers to confirm his mortality.

But D adds that "Timaeus contradicts these stories . . . Heraclides [their author] is altogether a man fond of strange stories, and one who would assert that a man had fallen from the moon."

18. Anaxagoras (500–428 B.C.)

(Anaximander, Anaximenes, and now yet another "Anax . . ."! Try to keep them straight.)

Born around 500 B.C. in Clazomenae in Asia Minor, near Heraclitus' native city of Ephesus, Anaxagoras came to Athens at the age of 20 and was the first famous philosopher to teach there. Pericles, the greatest Greek statesman, and Euripides, the greatest Greek comic playwright, were among his pupils.

Diogenes Laertius says that "he was eminent for his noble birth and his riches but still more for his magnanimity, inasmuch as he gave up all his inheritance to his relatives. . . . He devoted himself to philosophy, abandoning politics, and when someone said to him, 'You have no love for your country,' he replied: 'I have the greatest love for my country,' pointing up to heaven."

Because he taught that the heavenly bodies were stones and not gods (for instance, he said the sun was only a large fiery ball of stone larger than the Pelopennesus), he was tried for impiety and exiled from Athens. Athens was scandalized: he had replaced the gods with stones! And his theory seemed ridiculous: how could stones be up in the sky? But when a large meteorite fell in Sicily, people began to pay attention to him. (Perhaps they said, "Stones Happen.")

Anaxagoras explained change by three principles.

(1) He accepted the principle of Parmenides that being cannot come from non-being, that x cannot come simply from non-x.

(2) But we see qualities like heat and light suddenly appear when fire is kindled.

The only way to "save the appearances" and also the Parmenidean principle, Anaxagoras reasoned, is to suppose that these qualities must have been already really present but hiding in things, and are brought out into the open by acts like rubbing dry sticks together. So he explained change by the plurality and ubiquity (omnipresence) of the four primary qualities. He said that all qualities are hidden in all things as Empedoclean "seeds" or "roots."

(3) Finally, he explained the orderliness of physical change by the transcendence of Mind as the source of this order—similar to, but more personalized than, Heraclitus' *logos.*

This may sound religious to us, but to the Greeks it seemed to be atheism: an abstract substitute for their many concrete gods with humanoid bodies and humanoid feelings and failings. Dishonored in Athens and exiled to Lampscus, Anaxagoras was honored there, and after his death Metrodorus, his disciple, explained the gods of Greek mythology as mere symbols of physical forces of nature. For instance, the fall of the god Phaethon was interpreted as a symbolic description of the fall of a meteorite which was seen by thousands. Greek religious faith was being replaced by Greek rational philosophy

and science. (Something very different would happen in the Middle Ages, when these two enterprises were collaborators rather than rivals.)

Anaxagoras' 3 principles are illustrated by 3 of his sayings:

(1) **A real thing does not come to be or cease to be; what is called by that name is really the mixing and separating of real things. For how could hair come from what is not hair, or flesh from what is not flesh?**

(2) **Such being the case, we must suppose that composite things contain many ingredients of the greatest variety, the seeds of everything . , , in everything there is a portion of everything except Mind. Whatever there is the most of in a particular thing determines the manifest nature that we ascribe to it.**

(3) **While other things have a share in the being of everything else, Mind is unlimited, autonomous, and unmixed with anything, standing entirely by itself. For if Mind were to share in the universal mixture, the things with which it is mixed would prevent it from having command over everything, as it now does . . . Mind set in order all that was to be.**

Aristotle explains this last point, the necessary transcendence of Mind, as follows: "In order that it may rule and may have specific knowledge of what it is ruling, it must have essential knowledge of all things, and for this reason it has to be unmixed." For the knowledge of x as a whole cannot be any part of x.

Socrates, in the *Phaedo*, would speak of this discovery of Anaxagoras (explanation by Mind, not just matter) as the only helpful idea he learned from any pre-Socratic philosopher; but he faults Anaxagoras for not carrying out the implications and consequences of this idea. He says:

"I heard a man reading from a book which he said was by a certain Anaxagoras, to the effect that Mind arranges everything that occurs and is the cause of everything. But on reading Anaxagoras' book I perceive that he does not make any use of his concept of mind, nor does he appeal to it in explanation of how things are ordered, but he treats air, aether, and water as the causes. . . . This is as if to say that the reason I remain here in prison is that my bones and muscles keep me here. But in fact it is because I deem that it is good and right for me to remain here."

The issue is still with us:

(1) Is there "final causality," or purpose, or "intelligent design," in nature? Is matter to be explained by mind? That is one option.

(2) Or is mind to be explained by matter? That is a second option.

(3) Or is there no connection at all between the two? That is a third.

(4) Or is matter not just *explained* by mind but *made of* mind? A fourth possibility.

(5) Or is mind not just *explained by* matter but *made of* matter? That is a fifth possibility.

By the very nature of the issue there seem to be only these five possibilities. Which one is true is a question that cannot be settled by empirical science but only by philosophical reasoning, for all five theories account for science itself in different ways. They are:

(1) teleology, in which mind *moves* and causes matter, like an artist, as in Plato and Aristotle;

(2) epiphemomenalism, or qualified materialism, in which matter moves and causes mind, but not vice versa (an "epiphenomenon" is an appearance that is not a cause but only an effect, like a car's exhaust, or a fart), as in Marxism;

(3) absolute dualism, as in Descartes;

(4) mental monism, or immaterialism, as in some schools of Hindusim and Buddhism; or

(5) material monism, or absolute materialism, as in Democritus.

One of Anaxagoras' other strange and startling ideas was that there were inhabitants on other worlds in the sky; that life had reached earth by falling from the sky and then evolving in complexity; and that the monster slain by Hercules, the Nemean Lion, had fallen from the moon.

19. Democritus (450–370 B.C.)

Democritus was born in Abdera around the same time as Socrates, and lived to be 109. (Be a philosopher; outwit your life insurance company.) He visited Athens while Socrates was there and already famous, but did not seek him out. He complained, "I came to Athens and no one knew me." Status envy is common among intellectuals.

He is the only philosopher whose books Plato not only never mentions but even wanted to burn (literally!—but there were too many in circulation), apparently because he was a materialist, with no place in his theory of reality for mind or spirit, nor for values, morality, or choice. He said, "**everything happens of necessity**" because there is nothing but matter.

Of all Greek philosophers' cosmologies, Democritus' came the closest to that of modern science, for he gave us the first developed version of the atomic theory. Actually, Democritus learned this theory from his teacher Leucippus of Elea, who in turn was a maverick student of Parmenides and Zeno; but we know very little about Leucippus. The atomic theory was also suggested in ancient India, but never caught on there, as it did in Greece—probably because of the Greeks' greater curiosity about the material world and their interest in technology, which produced such things as voting machines and lottery machines for random jury selection. These afforded workable models or analogies to the universe as a very large machine.

Aristotle describes Democritus' cosmology this way:

According to the theory of Democritus it is the nature of the timeless objects to be tiny substances infinite in number. Accordingly, he postulates a place for them that is infinite in magnitude, which he designates by these names—'the void,' 'the nothing,' and 'the infinite,' whereas he speaks of each individual atom as 'the-real-thing,' 'the dense,' and 'being.' He conceives them as so small as to elude our senses, but as having all sorts of forms, shapes, and different sizes. Treating them as elements, he conceives of them as combining to produce visible and otherwise perceptible objects. As they move about in the void . . . they bump or brush against one another and tend to get ensnarled and interlocked. . . . When these substances remain joined for some time, it is explained by the fact that they fit snugly and so catch firm hold of one another. . . .

Democritus declares that the soul is a sort of fire or heat. For the atomic shapes are unlimited, and those which are spherical, he says, make up fire and soul . . . because such shapes can penetrate all things.

The theory can be analyzed into several distinct points:

(1) The only things that are real are tiny, invisible atoms. ("Atom" means "uncuttable" or "unsplittable." Of course, in modern physics atoms are not only splittable but very complex. We are still searching for the most elementary particle; perhaps there is none.)

(2) Everything that exists is made of atoms, including mind and thought.

(3) Therefore everything else that we usually think is real, such as values, choices, sensations, and abstract thoughts are only "by convention, not by nature"—i.e. they are only subjectively real, not objectively real; they are only names, not realities. Thus the question of philosophy—what is being?—is answered by physics.

(4) Atoms move because there is also "the void" or empty space. Space has no properties or powers. It is "non-being."

(5) Atoms have no qualities to differentiate them. They are identical except for the quantitatively measurable features of size, shape, position, and movement. Democritus called these "surface" (shape), "inclination" (direction of movement) and "intercontact" (adhesion).

(6) Since the atoms have different shapes, they are differently combined. All things are explained as collisions and adhesions of atoms with "hooks," as Democritus' later Roman disciple, Lucretius, explained. (So the whole universe is a cosmic "hookup culture," a large "Animal House" dormitory.)

(7) All events happen by direct transfer of momentum. There is no action at a distance.

(8) There is no need for any other causes. Only the material cause is real. Form comes about simply through external geometrical arrangement of atoms. No agent or efficient cause of motion is needed because the atoms are eternally, and beginninglessly, in motion. And final causes or ends, purposes and designs, are only subjective illusions.

(9) There is also a *methodological* implication, an atomism of method corresponding to an atomism of reality: anything real is understood by analysis into its smallest parts and finding the mechanism of their combination.

There are a number of logical problems with this philosophy. This is a good time for an extensive critique of it, since we will find it again, in more sophisticated forms, in Hobbes, and in Marx, and also in Descartes for one half of his mind-matter dualism; and the arguments against the theory in all its forms are easier to see when we look at it in its earliest and simplest form. It is the first ancient philosophy that we have encountered so far that is still very much alive, so a more detailed critique is called for.

(1) Atoms are, in fact, not "atoms": they are splittable. But this is a mistake in physics, not philosophy, and corrected by physics, not philosophy.

(2) The theory may explain the universe but it does not explain itself. The theory of atomism is a *theory*. The theory *exists*; atomists *do think*. How can a theory *about* atoms

be, or be made of, merely some of those atoms? Theories are made of ideas, not atoms. *Brains* are made of atoms. Theories of brains are not brains. The theory says that *all* things are composed of atoms; it is a theory about all things. But a theory about, or the knowledge of, all of x cannot be one of the parts of x. Knowledge is about something other than itself. The knowledge of the whole material universe must be something more than the whole material universe.

(3) To say that *nothing but atoms exists* is the main problem with materialism. For to say this seems to discount the data of our immediate experience, in many ways.

(a) The experience of pain, though *caused by* atoms (matter), *is* not merely atoms. The same physical cause, e.g. a knife cutting the skin, causes no pain in a dead body: the visitor (the knife) enters the house (the body) but nobody's home. Only beings with psyches feel pain, not rocks or trees. Pain is not just somatic but psychosomatic. It can be short-circuited either by (physical) drugs *or by (mental) hypnosis*. Mechanistic materialism cannot account for the fact that breaking a limb off a dog is different in kind, not just in degree, from breaking a limb off a tree.

(b) The theory does not account for mental or emotional pains, like depression, which can occur in perfectly healthy bodies without any physical cause but from mental or emotional causes. Mere thoughts can cause depression, and sometimes can cure it.

(c) The theory may account for the fact that physical changes can cause mental changes—e.g. when you slap my face, I get angry—but it does not account for the opposite fact: that thought and will can cause physical changes. I will to move my hand, and my hand moves. And I directly experience not just the physical event but the causal *connection*, the fact that I caused my hand to move by willing it. For I experience the difference between being forced to move my hand by another person's superior physical power and moving my hand by my own will power. (I do experience this, yet I do not experience it by my external material senses.)

(d) How can atoms explain thought? Democritus' answer was that fiery, tiny, spherical atoms constitute thought because they move faster than others, and can penetrate others. But material penetration is a totally different kind of thing than thought, or mental "penetration." The word is only an analogy, as when I say I "see" your point even if I am blind.

(e) To explain the difference between a true thought and a false thought by the difference between shapes or sizes or motions of atoms is simply a category confusion, like Pythagoras explaining the difference between men and women as the difference between odd and even numbers.

(f) Materialism has great difficulty explaining morality. That people have moral experiences and thoughts is a fact. We feel morally obliged, and we conceive concepts like justice and rights. Democritus tried to explain morality by atoms as follows: he said we will be disturbed or at peace depending on whether the motions of atoms affect our body in a harmonious or a violent way. Peacefulness is the condition that causes happiness,

and happiness is the moral goal or good. A good society is one in which individuals associate like peaceful atoms, with few collisions. But this explains only feelings of happiness and material conditions of peace, not our personal moral obligation to produce these states. Another category confusion. Justice and rights have no geometrical shapes.

(g) Really, there are no such things as persons, according to the strict materialist. There are only things. We are only objects thinking that we are subjects. But in a world of mere objects, how could subjectivity itself arise? How can an It become an I? A mere object of consciousness is not the same as, and cannot fully explain, a subject of consciousness; and the consciousness of objects, of others, cannot fully explain or cause self-consciousness, consciousness of self. There is more in the effect than in the cause here. There is more in the data than in the hypothesis that supposedly explains it.

(h) Democritus is surprisingly similar to Parmenides here, for both philosophers require us to deny our direct and immediate experience. Parmenides denies the experienced world and Democritus denies the experiencer. Parmenides denies the objects "outside" and Democritus denies the subject "inside."

(i) There is no morality without free choice. We are morally obliged to do only what is in our personal power to choose. As Kant put it, "ought" implies "can." But materialism entails determinism, which is the denial of free choice. As Democritus put it, **"everything happens by necessity."** Atoms have no will or choice. Atomism = determinism = no free choice = no morality.

(j) Of course our free choice is limited and conditioned by material events. It is *influenced by* material events, but it cannot be *created* by material events, for to create something is to make it begin to exist, but free choice has to already exist before it can be influenced.

And our choice can also influence material events. How can this be if it is merely the effect of them? How can effects cause their causes, or causes be effected by their effects?

(k) Even if free choice is an illusion, the illusion *exists* in the mind. But illusions, or false thoughts, cannot be explained by materialism. For the mind cannot be distinguished from objective reality if objective reality is simply the sum total of atoms and the mind and its thoughts are simply some of those atoms. How can some atoms be an illusion about other atoms? The materialist denies the very existence of the whole theater of consciousness in which is performed the play of illusory thoughts as well as true thoughts.

(l) If there is no free will, then we can't help how our tongue happens to wag or how our brain happens to work. In that case there is no reason for preferring any one theory to another. We always discount an idea when it can be shown to be determined by unfree and non-rational causes (e.g. when a terrified child believes all black dogs want to eat him because a black dog once bit him; or when a surgeon pokes at a brain with an electrode, causing the patient to hallucinate). But if materialism is true, *all* ideas are determined by unfree and unthinking, non-rational causes. Therefore all ideas are equally irrational—including that one!

(4) How can the void be nothing and yet be? A disciple of Parmenides, Melissus, had argued against the void as follows: If it is totally empty, then there is nothing between the two bodies that are its boundaries. But if there is nothing between the two bodies, then they are together. And if they are together, there is no empty space between them. How can space do anything at all, how can it separate bodies, if it is nothing?

This is a physical rather than a philosophical mistake on the part of Democritus. Modern physics has corrected the theory here, as it has corrected the "uncuttability" of atoms. In modern physics, space has definite properties and powers.

(5) There is a difference in kind between quantities and qualities. The difference itself is not merely quantitative. How can qualities like color, taste, and sound arise from things that have no qualities at all but only quantities? If the difference between blue and red is caused by nothing but the difference between quantitatively different wave lengths of light, we seem to be violating the principle of causality, getting more out of less, getting a difference in kind out of a mere difference in degree. Something (qualities) seems to be coming from nothing (no-qualities) here.

Also, even if modern science may explain how colorless causes can produce color sensations, it cannot explain how we *know* colors. In the materialist model of the brain as a chemical laboratory concocting color sensations upon receiving photons of light through optic nerves, what corresponds to *the scientist* in this laboratory? Whenever the materialist tries to explain human sensing or thinking, he omits the sensor or thinker! It's like astronomy without an astronomer.

(6) Regarding the explanation of things as combinations of atoms, modern physics accepts something like Democritus' explanation here but modifies it in complexity, especially by the primacy of energy over matter and by positing four irreducible physical forces rather than just one.

(7) We must say that there *is* action at a distance (e.g. gravity) if we are thinking only of solid matter, but not if we think of energy. This is especially true if we extend energy to include mental energy such as telepathy (for which there is considerable "soft" scientific evidence).

(8) Democritus ignores formal, efficient, and final causes. As Aristotle would argue later, in his theory of the "four causes," without any efficient and final causes, material causes alone cannot explain how or why matter takes certain determinate forms. Words by themselves do not make books. Authors (efficient causes) make books, of certain kinds (formal causes), for definite ends (final causes).

(9) With regard to method, analysis alone is not sufficient. Without some holistic, synthetic "big picture" to guide us, we cannot begin any directed analysis. Analysis and

synthesis require and reinforce each other, like sensations and ideas, and like inductive and deductive thinking.

Democritus' theory is not wrong for what it affirms but for what it denies. It is too simple, far simpler than reality. It is an example of "reductionism," reducing a complex whole to just one of its parts or aspects. That is its fundamental problem. It explains only some, but far from all, of the data. But what makes a hypothesis truly scientific is its adequacy in explaining the data. In other words, scient*ism* is not scientific enough.

Materialism is essentially a metaphysics, but its most crucial problem is the ethics it implies. One's ethics always must depend on one's metaphysics, for we cannot morally choose what we believe is simply metaphysically unreal. And that is just the problem with materialism. A "materialist," in the popular sense, is a person with low ideals, who recognizes only material goods like money, pleasure, and power. Materialism in theory naturally entails this popular materialism in practice; a materialist metaphysics naturally leads to a materialist ethics, and a materialistic life, and a materialistic person. This consequence can be resisted, and often is—some materialists are very ethical people—but it takes a disconnect in the mind to do so. Materialistic thought cannot be happily married to non-materialistic ideals. To try to marry a high morality and a low metaphysics is like trying to marry a bird and a snake. Probably, one will eat the other.

It also goes without saying that materialism also implies atheism. Not all atheists are materialists (since one can believe in the human spirit without believing in any superhuman spirit), but all materialists are atheists (since one cannot believe in superhuman spirit if one disbelieves in all spirit). This is why materialism, like atheism, is always a minority position. If atheism is true, then the vast majority of all human beings in history, who have believed in some kind of religion, have invested their lives, their minds, their wills, their faith, their hope, their love, and their loyalty in a massive illusion, the greatest 'con job' in history. And if materialism is true, then atheism is true. Therefore if materialism is true, then the vast majority of all human beings are deeply deluded.

20. Lucretius (99–55 B.C.)

Lucretius was not a Greek philosopher but a later Roman poet, but I put this short chapter on him after Democritus because it was Lucretius who popularized Democritus' materialism in detail in *De Rerum Natura,* "On the Nature of Things," explaining *everything*, including the soul, religion, morality, sensation, and thought, by the atomic theory.

The simplest introduction to the materialistic world-view is Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*. It is the first and classic text of philosophical materialism, and highly recommended for reading, especially for comparing it with Plato's alternative. (Finite things are always best appreciated by contrast with their opposites.) It is beautifully written, both poetic and logically clear. Later, more complex versions of materialism (Epicurus, Bacon, Hobbes, Hume, Bentham, Mill, Comte, Spenser, Marx) can best be understood by starting with this simple, logically consistent, clear, and stylistically beautiful ancient masterpiece, just as later, more complex versions of Platonism, Buddhism, or Christianity can best be understood by first reading the words of Plato, Buddha, or Christ.

All the essentials of materialism are here in a simple, primitive form: the metaphysics, the cosmology, the anthropology, the epistemology, the ethics, the philosophy of religion. It is an instructive example of how a single philosophical idea can have radical thought-changing and life-changing consequences in every field.

It is not necessary to specify the details of Lucretius' philosophy because all the essential ideas are in Democritus. What Lucretius adds is poetic style, technical details (e.g. of how sense perception works), and an emphasis on the religious and moral applications (how there are no gods or divine punishments to fear after death). Thus life as well as thought can be simple, devoted to pleasure and tranquility.

Simplicity is the chief charm of this philosophy. It needs few words. Our language is full of names for things that it asserts simply do not exist: God, gods, spirits, demons, angels, souls, ghosts, Heaven, Hell, creation, commandments, miracles, absolutes, etc. Lucretius explains everything by only six simple principles:

(1) Nothing is ever created out of nothing.

(2) Nothing is ever annihilated.

(3) Matter exists and consists of atoms.

(4) There is also empty space ("the void") for matter to move in.

(5) Besides matter and space, nothing else exists.

(5) Atoms are indestructible and eternal.

But like all Hellenistic philosophies, its point is practical, not theoretical: in four words, *no religion, no fear* (of divine punishments, cosmic justice, etc.). It is the world of John Lennon's "Imagine."

How did it actually work out for Lucretius, this life devoted simply to pleasure and tranquility? Portraits of Lucretius show him frowning rather than smiling (perhaps because they were sculpted by his enemies), and he seems to have been searching for happiness with some desperation all his life, which according to some authorities he ended by suicide—which is something happy people do not do. Diogenes Laërtius says that Lucretius was driven to madness and suicide by a love potion. In that case, he didn't worry *enough*: you can't be too careful of your chemistry if you're a materialist.

21. Protagoras (481–420 B.C.) and the Sophists*

Philosophy has been called "the great conversation." This conversation so far had passed through four logical stages, and the Sophists initiated the fifth and most interesting one.

(1) First, the Milesians tried to find a single explanation for all things in nature.

(2) A second question arose: how this "one" became many, how it changed. Heraclitus answered that the "one" was change itself.

(3) Parmenides countered with the opposite answer: change was illusory.

(4) The Pluralists (Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus) tried, in different ways, to reconcile the unchanging with the changing.

(5) All previous philosophers had looked outward, at nature. The Sophists looked inward, at man. They were the first to turn philosophy's attention to the philosopher.

Protagoras of Abdera, who lived in Athens shortly before Socrates (5th century B.C.), was the most long-lived, rich, and successful of the "Sophists." The name means, literally, "wise men" or "wise guys." (The first was *their* interpretation, the second was their critics'.) They were itinerant educators who taught their "wisdom" for high fees to rich Athenians who needed to learn rhetorical skills to defend themselves in court when sued (which was quite often, as in America). Their "wisdom" consisted mainly of clever tricks of rhetoric. ("Rhetoric" is the art of persuading by speech.)

This was a new response to a new need—in fact, for the rich it was a necessary survival skill in Athens, because of two recent inventions: democracy and the jury system. Both demanded demagoguery (the "augury" or power to persuade the "demos" or masses). In both the courts and in the public assemblies (where policies were decided by direct majority vote, not by elected representatives), verdicts were usually determined more by the cleverness of the speakers than by the inherent justice of the case. Into this need the Sophists inserted themselves, very profitably. Their most famous advertisement was: "We can make the weakest argument the strongest."

D says that "Protagoras was a pupil of Democritus. And he was surnamed Wisdom. . . . He was the first person who asserted that in every question there were two sides to the argument exactly equal to one another . . . that everything was true." Also that "he was the first person who demanded payment of his pupils. . . . He it was too who first left facts out of consideration and fastened his arguments on words."

The Sophists were skeptics in epistemology, relativists in ethics, and subjectivists in both. They denied the existence and knowability of objective truth and objective values.

* This title sounds like a rock group, probably sixties doo-wop.

They believed that both truth and goodness were invented by and relative to subjective human minds and wills, whether individually or socially. Protagoras' famous quotation summarizing this position is that **Man is the measure of all things**

Let's look more carefully at these two kinds of subjectivism. First, in ethics.

We can distinguish two kinds of laws, or rules: positive laws and natural laws. "Positive" laws are laws that are "posited" or invented by human wills, like rules for the road and rules for using words. "Natural laws" are discovered rather than invented, like the law of gravity or the laws of geometry. Natural laws do not vary from culture to culture, time to time, or individual to individual. But positive laws do; therefore they are also called "conventional" laws. The Greek word for a cultural conventions is *nomos*, and the word for a natural law is *logos*. (See Heraclitus, chapter 13 on *logos*.)

The controversial question is: Is moral law *logos* or *nomos?* Are there natural moral laws as well as natural physical laws? Does *logos* include moral law? Are there three kinds of laws or only two? That is, are there (1) objective and universal moral laws that tell us what all people *ought* to do, as well as (2) objective and universal physical laws that tell us what all nature actually does do and (3) subjective and local civil laws that tell us what some people (the lawmakers) want other people to do? Are there laws of good and evil, right and wrong, that are not just the man-made laws of some society?

If so, then social laws ("positive" laws) can be evaluated and criticized by the standard of these "higher" natural laws, and countercultural rebellion can be morally justified. If not, not. (Thus moral relativists and positivists, who believe that only positive moral laws exist, *logically* must be social conservatives and conformists, even though they are in fact usually nonconformists because the majority has always believed in "natural law" and positivists or relativists do not.)

Nearly all law schools in Western civilization used to teach some version of a "natural law." Blackstone's classic law text was based on natural law. So was the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator [not by their government or their peers] with certain unalienable rights; that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." (The origin version read 'property.')

The vast majority of law schools today no longer teach that. They either ignore it or deny it, and teach some version of 'legal positivism' (e.g. Harvard's 'Critical Legal Studies'). So 2400 years later, the Sophists have convinced the majority in the legal establishment of their main point. But they have not convinced the majority of other Americans, who, like the ancient Athenians, are shocked by this moral relativism. The issue divides our society, and is at the heart of our ongoing "culture wars." For instance, 'politically correct' language which forbids using morally 'judgmental' terms like 'unnatural acts,' is based on the Sophists' "big idea" that morality is not natural but conventional. (Most Americans, according to polls, are moral relativists only about sex, however logically inconsistent that may seem to be.)

Aristophanes was a traditionalist who satirized the Sophists in his comic dramas, especially *The Clouds* (in which he classified Socrates as a Sophist, though Socrates was really their most formidable opponent). If Aristophanes saw our title 'Protagoras and the Sophists,' he would probably invent lyrics like these for the singing group:

Live for pleasure;
You're the measure.
Live for power:
Virtue's sour.
Follow your itch:
Get filthy rich.
Just be clever.
Scruples? Never!
"Truth"? Aim higher:
Be a lawyer/liar.

(Of course satire doesn't give your mind wisdom, but it does give your face smiles.)

In epistemology, the Sophists were skeptics. They taught that we could not attain *knowledge* of objective truth, only subjective *opinions*. Another way of putting the same point is that we cannot know *reality*, only *appearances*, which are subjective and relative to each observer.

In Plato's *Theaetetus* Protagoras is represented as saying: **"What I mean by a wise man is one who can alter people's ways of judging so that what appears** [and is] **to them bad now will appear** [and will be] **to them good. It is like the case of some food which appears** [and is] **bitter to a sick man but appears** [and is] **quite the opposite to a man in health. It should not be said that either of the two men is more knowing or more ignorant than the other; they are simply different. . . . My position, then, is that whatever seems right and admirable to a particular city-state is truly right and admirable—during the period of time in which that opinion continues to be held."**

Like advertisers, the Sophists believed that "image is everything," since all we could know were appearances, or images. (Advertising is the world's oldest profession: it was invented by the Devil in the Garden of Eden.) (It's a joke; don't write me an angry letter.) The Sophists would have applauded Machiavelli's principle that propaganda and the control of appearances is the key to political power, for "everyone sees what you seem to be; few know who you really are." (*The Prince,* chapter 18) There is a close connection between the Sophists' (relativistic) ethics and their (skeptical) epistemology.

Protagoras was especially skeptical of religion and the gods. He said, **"As for the gods, I have no way of knowing that they do or do not exist, nor, if they exist, of what form they are."** He was thus an *agnostic* (one who does not claim to know). But the Athenians perceived this as *atheism*, banished him from Athens and burned his books.

There are serious philosophical problems with both epistemological and moral relativism:

(a) Epistemological relativism, like skepticism (see chapter 26), seems to be self-contradictory.

(1) The self-contradiction can be seen in Plato's *Theaetetus*, which has Protagoras arguing that **"it is not possible to think what is false, because one can only think what he experiences, and what he experiences is true** [to him]**."** But this is self-contradictory, for it assumes that the traditional view, that we *can* know objective truth, is false. So it *is* possible to think what is false: if the Sophists are right, all non-Sophists do exactly that!

Another way to put the argument is that if every opinion is true, so is the opinion that not every opinion is true. If no opinion is false, neither is the opinion that some opinions are false.

(2) Epistemological relativism also cannot account for science, which does in fact successfully come to know many objective and universal truths.

(3) If the Sophists are right, philosophy is "vanity of vanities." For philosophy is the love of wisdom; it is a Romeo-and-Juliet love story; and the Sophists' message to Romeo is that Juliet is dead.

But philosophy always buries its undertakers.

Actually, the terms are usually used interchangeably, skepticism is in a sense the exact opposite of epistemological relativism, for skepticism says that no one has the truth, while relativism says that everyone has it, for truth is only "my truth" or "your truth." Skepticism denies truth, relativism denies error. Since everyone wants the truth, and since having it makes you content, skeptics are never content and relativists are never discontent. (So skeptics make better philosophers!)

(b) The Sophists' *moral* relativism has even more pressing problems than their epistemological relativism and/or skepticism, because these problems are practical, not just theoretical; about living, not just about thinking.

(1) Moral relativism ignores *conscience*, which always speaks with absolute authority. Even people who believe it is impossible to know any other universal moral laws usually still believe it is *always* wrong to disobey their own individual conscience. Even relativists have one absolute, unless they get a consciencectomy.

(2) Moral relativism also seems to violate *the Golden Rule*, the most basic and universally agreed principle that you should do to others what you want others to do to you. We all want others to respect our rights and to give us justice—in other words, *not* to practice moral relativism. For the relativist there are no exceptionless moral laws, not even the Golden Rule, so it logically follows that it's OK to ask others to obey it while you don't.

(3) Moral relativism also seems to *destroy social bonds*, and thus society itself, for keeping promises is a minimum requirement for all social bonds. Absent this moral bond,

only external, physical force can hold a society together—and that is totalitarianism, tyranny, or dictatorship. Without the inner cop of conscience, society either dissolves or relies on the outer cop of force, as in Hobbes (chapter 74). The societies that lived the longest were always the most morally serious: Jewish (3500 years), Confucian (2100 years), Islamic (1400 years), and Roman (700 years).

(4) Moral relativism is *boring*. It makes heroism impossible. Moral relativists cannot write great stories.

(5) Plato tries to prove in the *Republic* that it also makes you *unhappy*, for it undermines virtue, which is to the soul what health is to the body. It violates your very nature.

Although the Sophists' skepticism and moral relativism were negative and destructive, they made at least three very important positive contributions:

(1) They changed the *questions*. They turned the interests of philosophers from science to ethics, from the cosmos to man, from questions about physical facts to questions about human values, from metaphysics and cosmology to anthropology, epistemology, ethics, and politics. In this way, Socrates was the greatest Sophist. They paved his way.

(2) They developed new *methods* of logical argumentation. Although these could easily be misused, they could also be effectively and rightly used—especially the technique of "dialectical" arguing, or arguing for both sides of an issue. Protagoras shocked the Athenians by setting up debate contests, training his students to argue both sides of an issue; and to the average citizen this implied that there was no real right or wrong. But this method—seeing what your opponent sees, looking at both sides from a neutral perspective before judging—is essential for law, for science, for good philosophy, and even for ordinary human relationships that are psychologically effective (if you want to be heard, first listen) and morally fair (remember the Golden Rule). In this way too (the use of dialectic), Socrates was a Sophist, though he used dialectic more honestly and convincingly than they did, avoiding their verbal quibbles, for he used it for the end of objective truth rather than for personal power, honor, or wealth.

(3) By their skepticism and relativism, the Sophists drew a line in the sand: they posed a fundamental *challenge* to philosophy that all major philosophers for the next 2400 years would have to respond to in one way or another, either by essentially agreeing (as many, but not all, modern philosophers do) or essentially disagreeing (as nearly all pre-modern philosophers do), however much these later agreements or disagreements were modified and nuanced. The Sophists, then, in raising this centrally important issue, were a touchstone for all subsequent philosophers. Their challenge demanded a response: a clearer and stronger argument for the traditional belief in objective truth and values. (How would *you* refute Protagoras' argument in the *Theaetetus* above?) Plato devoted many of his dialogs to Socrates arguing with sophists, e.g. *Ion*, *Critias*, *Hippias*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and Thrasymachus in Book I of the *Republic*.

The great 20th-century historian Arnold Toynbee saw all of history as "challenge and response," and since philosophy is a crucial part of history, the history of philosophy

too is "challenge and response"; and the challenge, even if it is destructive and dangerous, is as necessary to progress as the response. The religiosity of a village needs the "village atheist" to keep it on its toes, and a political party needs competition and critique to stay honest. (Contrast single-party systems like Fascism and Communism.) Doubts and questions test and strengthen intellectual beliefs, just as sufferings and struggles test and strengthen personal faith and courage.

The issue the Sophists raised is utterly contemporary, in fact it is probably the single most important issue for modern Western civilization. For this civilization, envied and imitated by the rest of the world, now differs most radically from all others that have ever existed by the fact that most of its intellectuals, mind-molders and educators, both formal (universities) and informal (media), for the first time in human history, fundamentally agree with the Sophists.

Mussolini wrote: "Everything I have said and done in these past years is relativism. . . . If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and for men who claim to be the bearers of an objective, immortal truth . . . then there is nothing more relativistic than Fascistic attitudes and activities. . . . From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable." (*Diuturna*, pp. 374–77) The simple but crucial question that the relativist finds it hard to answer is: if you won't get caught and punished, *why not?* Why not be a Fascist or a Nazi if you want to and if "there is nothing right or wrong, but thinking makes it so"?

But the Sophists made for good jokes. One of Protagoras' clever students, Euathlus, made a legal contract with his teacher to pay his weighty tuition fee only after he won his first case in court. He then refused to try any cases in court, so Protagoras sued him for his tuition fee, arguing that "If Euathlus loses this case, he must pay me, according to the judgment of the court; but if he wins, he must pay me, according to the terms of our contract. And he must either lose or win. So he must pay me in either case." Euathlus argued back, "If I win this case, I will not have to pay Protagoras, according to the judgment of the court; but if I lose, I will not have to pay, according to the terms of our contract. I must either win or lose. In either case, I do not have to pay." Protagoras forgot the adage that a lawyer who tries his own case has a fool for a client.

22. Gorgias the Sophist (483–375 B.C.)

The most famous of all the Sophists in Athens was Gorgias, not because he was the philosophically profoundest but because he was the most eloquent. Citizens paid great sums of money to receive his instruction. Plato satirizes the worldliness, shallowness, and venality of his philosophy but shows great respect for his person in the dialog by his name, the "Gorgias.," Since this dialog is beautifully constructed, has great personal "existential" bite (its question is essentially How shall I live and who should I be?), and contains the essential moral point and argument of the "Republic" minus the questionable politics, I highly recommend it as the second best introduction to Socrates and Plato, next to the "Apology."

Gorgias is famous for three philosophical assertions, all of which concern that profound and multifaceted Greek concept of *logos. Logos* is the goal of all of Plato's philosophy, and of philosophy itself as classically conceived. Gorgias's three assertions deny the three basic meanings of *logos*: the metaphysical, the epistemological, and the linguistic.

(1) **There is no being.** (There is no stable order, intelligibility, form, structure, or meaning.)

(2) **Even if there was being, there could be no knowledge of it.** (There are no stable concepts, intelligence, understanding, truth, certainty, or wisdom.)

(3) **Even if there was knowledge of it, there could be no communication of it.** (There are no meaningful words, language, speech, discourse, communication, or revelation.)

Gorgias prophetically summarized the whole history of Western philosophy in those three sentences. For the history of Western philosophy consists largely of these three questions:

(1) Ancient and medieval philosophy focuses on the first *logos,* order in reality, metaphysical order and meaning. For nearly all premodern philosophers, everything else — cosmology, philosophical anthropology, philosophical theology, epistemology, ethics, and politics—is derived from and dependent on metaphysics. For what the universe, or man, or God, or knowledge, or morality, or society *is* depends on *what is*, on what kinds of being or reality exist.

(2) Classical modern philosophy, beginning with Bacon and Descartes, focuses on the second *logos,* the question of epistemology, the question of how we know.

(3) Twentieth century philosophy focuses on the third *logos,* language.

Each of these three phases of Western philosophy ended in skepticism:

(1) The upshot of pre-modern philosophy is metaphysical skepticism, stemming from Nominalism (the denial of reality to universals), especially in Ockham (chapter 52). If universals have no reality, neither does the supreme universal, *being*.

(2) The upshot of classical modern philosophy is the epistemological skepticism of Hume and the even more skeptical reply to Hume given by Kant, which asserts that it is impossible for us to know "things-in-themselves," and which redefines knowledge as *constructing* all the meaning and order in the world rather than *discovering* it. Kant called this "the Copernican Revolution in philosophy."

(3) The upshot of contemporary postmodern philosophy of language is Deconstructionism, which denies that words ("text") refer to reality ("world") at all, i.e. the objectively real world outside ourselves. This reference or pointing or signing (signifying) characteristic of words, and also of thoughts, is called "intentionality." For pre-modern thought, even things are words (signs, symbols); for Deconstructionism, even words are only things, not signs. In fact they are weapons, for they are used for power, not truth. To speak of truth is condemned as "logocentrism."

Thus the ghost of Gorgias has haunted the whole history of Western philosophy. In the next chapter we will meet the first philosophical ghostbuster. His name is Socrates.

23. Socrates (469–399 B.C.)

Socrates never wrote a book. His teachings can be summarized in ten sentences (see below). Yet he gets more space in this book than most other philosophers, who wrote dozens of books and taught thousands of things. Why?

Because Socrates was probably the second most important and influential human being who ever lived, next to Jesus.

To see why, consider the following:

The three most distinctive features of Western civilization are probably Jewish and Christian religion, philosophy, and science. Until the 18th century, philosophy and science were not sharply separated. Newton's major work was entitled "Principles of Natural *Philosophy*." Each of the sciences gradually came to distinguish themselves from philosophy, like children leaving home to form their own families and households.

The foundation of most of Western philosophy (*and* science) is Aristotle. He is to the West what Confucius is to China. As later generations called Confucius simply "the first teacher," the medievals called Aristotle simply "*the* Philosopher."

The foundation of Aristotle is Plato. Aristotle is 75% Plato; Plato plus; the first footnote to Plato; a correction to Plato. Without Plato, no Aristotle.

And without Socrates, no Plato. The foundation of Plato is Socrates. Plato is to Socrates what St. Paul is to Jesus: he claims to be only his faithful follower and interpreter and systematizer.

Socrates relativizes all previous philosophers, who are always collectively called "the pre-Socratic" philosophers, just as Jews call all others "Gentiles" and Christians call the whole of the Jewish scriptures "the *Old* Testament." And Socrates also relativizes the philosophers after him because every school of ancient philosophy after Socrates (except the Epicurean materialists) claimed to be the authentic interpretation of Socrates, just as every Christian church claims to be the authentic interpretation of Jesus.* Socrates is to philosophy what Jesus is to religion.

* These philosophers include (1) Xenophon, who presents Socrates as a paradigm of practical, sensible wisdom; (2) Aristophanes, who in his satiric comedy *The Clouds* presents him as a Sophist; (3) Plato, whose Theory of Forms was the fulfillment of Socrates' search for universals; (4) Aristotle, for whom he was the inventor of inductive logic and definitions; (5) the mystic Plotinus and his "Neoplatonism"; (6) the Skeptics, who emphasized his attack on dogmatism; (7) the Stoics, who centered on his "live according to reason, not passion"; (8) the Cyrenaics, who pointed to his principle that "reason regulates pleasures"; (9) even the Epicureans, who, though hedonists and materialists (unlike Socrates), were rationalists (like

Like Jesus, Socrates divides mankind. No philosopher has ever provoked such conflicting interpretations and evaluations of him, sometimes within the same person. E.g. Alcibiades, the beautiful, powerful, clever, corrupt, and dissolute egotist, said of Socrates, "He is the only person who ever made me ashamed. . . . Many a time have I wished that he were dead, and yet I know that I should be so much more sorry than glad if he were to die . . . his absolute unlikeness to any human being that is or ever has been is absolutely astonishing." (*Symposium)*

Plutarch said that "he was the first to show that life at all times and in all parts, in all that we suffer or do, always admits philosophy."

St. Justin Martyr wrote that "Christ is the *Logos* [Word, Mind, or Reason] of whom all men are partakers, and those who lived according to Reason are Christians even though they have been thought atheists, as, among the Greeks, Socrates."

St. Thomas Aquinas compared him to Christ: "It was proper for Christ not to write down his teaching [since he so perfectly lived it] . . . which is also the reason why, among the pagans, Pythagoras and Socrates, who were the most excellent teachers, did not want to write anything."

Calvin wrote: "Socrates died like Christ; yet by killing him men achieved no valid refutation of his teaching."

The Earl of Shaftesbury called him "the greatest of philosophers, the very founder of philosophy itself . . . the philosophical Patriarch . . . the divinest man who had ever appeared in the heathen world."

Shelley called Socrates "the Jesus Christ of Greece." Fenelon called Jesus "the Socrates of Galilee."

John Stuart Mill called him "the head and prototype of all subsequent teachers of virtue," and famously said, "It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."

Socrates); (10) the Cynics, who admired Socrates' stand against social conventions; (11) the Megarians (early logicians), among the ancient Greeks; and, throughout the history of later philosophy, (12) St. Justin Martyr, for whom he was the proto-Christian; (13) Erasmus, for whom he was the proto-Humanist ("Saint Socrates, pray for us"); (14) Descartes and Hegel, who un-Socratically systematized his rationalism; (15) rational Empiricists like Locke and Hume, who claimed his skeptical, open-minded spirit if not his doctrine; (16) Christian "Existentialists" like Pascal and Kierkegaard, for whom Socrates "existed" his philosophy; (17) Marcel, who called his Personalist philosophy "Neo-Socratic"; (18) the atheist Existentialist Nietzsche, for whom Socrates and Jesus were his two most formidable opponents; (19) Charles Sanders Pierce, the founder of Pragmatism, which he says "appears to have been virtually the philosophy of Socrates," and also the Pragmatist William James, who says "There is absolutely nothing new in the pragmatic method. Socrates was an adept at it"; and even (20) Confucians, (21) Taoists, (22) Gandhian pacifists, and (23) Hindus, each of whom see Socrates as theirs; Radhakrishnan, e.g., sees him as a Hindu misunderstood by the Greeks (in *Philosophy East and West*). (24) Even Thomas Aquinas called him the greatest of philosophers. (ST III,42,4)

R.H. Crossman observed that "Socrates was not famous for anything—except for being Socrates."

Renan said that "Jesus founded religion as Socrates founded philosophy and Aristotle science . . . all has been built on the foundations which they laid."

Heidegger wrote, "Socrates was the purest thinker of the Occident . . . all thinkers since Socrates, their greatness notwithstanding, have to take cover before him."

Kierkegaard wrote, "he was one of those human beings whose exterior is not enough. . . . What Socrates emphasized so much—to stand still and to reflect, i.e. to be silent—this is what his whole life means in relation to world history . . . there is a deep silence, until it is interrupted by the many very different schools, by the noisy attempts of his students to derive their origin from this secret and mysterious source." "Socrates, in my opinion, is and remains the only reformer I know. . . . There cannot really be the least doubt that what Christianity needs is another Socrates."

Maritain wrote, "It was Socrates who saved Greek thought from the mortal danger into which the Sophists had brought it . . . the Sophists claimed to know everything and did not believe in truth; Socrates professed ignorance and taught his hearers to seek nothing but the truth. Thus his entire work was a work of conversion. . . . This work was of such importance for the future of the human intellect that it is not strange that Socrates accomplished it as a mission divinely inspired."

His enemies are almost as numerous as his friends.

Spinoza wrote, "The authority of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates has not much weight with me."

Like Luther, Rousseau compares him very unfavorably to Christ: "What blindness it takes to compare the son of Sophroniscus with the son of Mary!"

The "humanist" Schiller calls him "the boon companion of all the dissolute young swells in Athens" and ranks him below Protagoras the Sophist, whom he calls "the wisest of men."

Bertrand Russell blames him for unpardonable sins against science, and says "he is dishonest and sophistical in argument. . . . There is something smug and unctuous about him, which reminds one of a bad type of cleric. . . . Unlike some of his predecessors, he was not scientific in his thinking, but was determined to prove the universe agreeable to his ethical standards. This is treachery to truth and the worst of philosophic sins." (Russell says even worse things about Jesus.)

Santayana too complains that "Socrates affected to care nothing about natural science" and says that his "edifying myths had disastrous consequences for philosophy: it created metaphysics."

Nazi "philosophers" like Rosenberg accused him of being too plebeian, and Communists accused him of being too aristocratic.

George Sorel says "Socrates' ethics was detestable" and complains of "all the evils which were to flow from his theses," especially that "he did not understand the labor question." He says of Socrates' apolitical anti-totalitarianism: "Since the time of Socrates the idea of the State has been unable to establish itself."

Jeremy Bentham, the founder of Utilitarianism, wrote: "Socrates and Plato were talking nonsense under pretense of teaching wisdom and morality. This morality of theirs consisted in words—this wisdom of theirs was the denial of matters known to every man's experience . . . what I read of Socrates was insipid." Matthew Arnold wrote of that passage in Bentham: "From the moment of reading that, I am delivered from the bondage of Bentham!"

The historian Macaulay wrote, "The more I read about him, the less I wonder that they poisoned him."

Nietzsche accused him of killing the spirit of Greek tragedy with his rationalism, "the one great Cyclops eye of Socrates . . . that eye in which the sweet madness of artistic enthusiasm never glowed . . . this eye was forbidden to look with approval into the Dionysian abysses."

The Nietzschean and proto-Nazi historian Oswald Spengler says, in *The Decline of the West*, that "Socrates was a nihilist."

Socrates is also the only great philosopher who was executed by his society. Like Jesus, he died as a martyr, died for his beliefs, after an unjust trial. It was not just Socrates but philosophy itself that was on trial. And like Jesus, Socrates was tried for impiety when he was in fact the most pious man in his society.

Why was Socrates so offensive to Athens, which was the world's most enlightened, tolerant, and democratic society in history so far? If we do not understand that, we do not understand Socrates, just as we do not understand Jesus if we do not understand his offensiveness, and why the world's most religious society thought Jesus to be so evil and threatening to religion that he deserved to be crucified.

He lived as a poor man in the golden age of a great city, the world's first democracy, which prided itself on its freedoms. Yet all segments of Athenian society conspired together to kill Socrates. His three accusers, Anytus, Meletus, and Lycon, represented the three most important segments of their society: the poets, the politicians, and the craftsmen. (Compare the division of departments in modern universities into the humanities, the social sciences, and the physical sciences.) Similarly, the charge against Jesus, nailed to the cross, was written in the three worldwide languages of Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. The whole world conspired to eliminate these two pests. Skeptical, relativistic Sophists and dogmatic, absolutistic traditionalists agreed on only one thing: Socrates was the enemy. Similarly, against Jesus, we find an alliance of collaborationist Herodians and revolutionary Zealots, and also of "liberal," naturalistic, skeptical Sadducees and strict, supernaturalistic, legalistic Pharisees. Like Jesus, Socrates unites his enemies and divides his world, into friends and enemies. It is a new and different division than before: a new touchstone has come into history.

How did he offend? Both by his method and by his teaching.

His method, the famous "Socratic method," consists in cross-examining ideas as attorneys cross-examine witnesses. This inevitably showed up the inept defenders of foolish

ideas as fools—a lesson people are not usually very grateful for. Socrates always began by teaching them Lesson One: the lesson of ignorance; that we do not know what we think we know; that there are only two kinds of people: fools, who think they are wise, and the wise, who know they are fools. It is the intellectual equivalent of Jesus' moral lesson that the only two kinds of people are sinners who think they are saints and saints who know they are sinners—another lesson to which most people did not respond with gratitude!

His teaching was minimal, but enough to be threatening: that your identity is in your soul, not your possessions or your body (Socrates had one of the ugliest bodies in human history, resembling a squashed frog), and that the care for the soul by wisdom and virtue was the only really necessary thing, and only fools neglect it—another lesson not likely to win many friends among the fools.

To establish this, Socrates had to defend the validity, and objective reality, of wisdom and virtue, truth and goodness, against the Sophists' epistemological and moral relativism and subjectivism. So he alienated them as well, though he used and refined some of their dialectical (questioning-in-dialog) methods. If we value Socrates we should be grateful to the Sophists, for their critique elicited his response; their undermining of wisdom and virtue stimulated him to find surer foundations for them.

Socrates and the Sophists together revolutionized the content of philosophy as well as the method, for they turned the attention of philosophy away from cosmological questions about the universe—pre-Socratic philosophy had mostly been primitive science—to questions about the nature of man, human life, and moral values—the questions of human existence. In this sense one could truly say that Socrates was the first Existentialist.

He was either unemployed or, like his father, a mere stonecutter. He married Xanthippe, a remarkably shrewish woman, and had three remarkably unremarkable sons. Though he met many other philosophers (Parmenides, Zeno, the Sophists, and Pythagoreans), and though he was himself famous in his own lifetime, yet like Jesus he never traveled far from home, founded a school, wrote a book, inspired a war, or took sides in politics. His whole life was focused on one thing: "know thyself" (*Gnothi seauton,* the Delphic Oracle's first commandment, written over the door of its temple). It was not Socrates but Athens that impiously neglected this commandment of religious piety, yet Athens condemned Socrates to death—for impiety.

One incident transformed his life, made Socrates Socrates, and made philosophy philosophy. It is so historically crucial that it should be told in his own words from his "Apology" ("Defense"):

I will call the god in Delphi as witness of my wisdom . . . Chairephon, my friend since I was young . . . once went to Delphi and dared to ask this question of the oracle . . . he asked if anyone was wiser than I was. The priestess answered, then,

that no one was wiser. . . . Well, when I heard that reply I thought: 'What in the world does the god mean? What in the world is his riddle? For I know in my conscience that I am not wise in anything, great or small; then what in the world does he mean when he says I am wisest? Surely he is not lying? For a god must not lie.' I was puzzled for a long time to understand what he meant; then I thought of a way to try to find out, something like this: I approached one of those who had the reputation of being wise, for there, I thought, if anywhere, I should test the revelation and prove that the oracle was wrong: "Here is one wiser than I, but you said I was wiser." When I examined him—I need not tell his name, but it was one of our statesmen . . . when I conversed with him, I thought this man seemed to be wise both to many others and especially to himself, but that he was not; and then I tried to show him that he thought he was wise but was not. Because of that he disliked me, and so did many others who were there, but I went away thinking to myself that I was wiser than this man; the fact is that neither of us knows anything beautiful and good, but he thinks he does know when he doesn't, and I don't know and don't think I do, so I am wiser than he is by only this trifle, that what I do not know I don't think I do. After that I tried another, one of those reputed to be wiser than that man, and I thought just the same. Then he and many others took a dislike to me. So I went to one after another after that, and saw that I was disliked; and I sorrowed and feared, but still it seemed necessary to hold the god's business of the highest importance, so I had to go on trying to find out what the oracle meant . . . the truth really is, gentlemen, that the god in fact is wise, and in this oracle he means that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and it appears that he does not say this of Socrates [only] **but just adds my name to take me as an example, as if he were to say that this one of you human beings is wisest who like Socrates knows that he is in truth worth nothing as regards wisdom. This is what I still, even now, go about searching and investigating in the god's way. . . . I help the god by proving that man is not wise."** (*Apology*)

And this was the "impiety" for which he was tried, found guilty, and executed!

Socrates' personality was ideal for this task: humble, gentle, ironic, humorous, and patient with his "patients" rather than egotistical, arrogant, or self-righteous. Neither a skeptic nor a dogmatist, he questioned everything because he knew he did not know. Skeptics do not question because they do not believe they will ever find the truth; dogmatists (in the popular sense of the word) do not question because they think they have it all already.

According to Diogenes Laertius, "He often said that he wondered at those who made stone statues when he saw how careful they were that the stone should be like the man it was intended to represent, but how careless they were of themselves, as to guarding against being like stone." "He used to say that others lived to eat but he ate to live."

His wife Xanthippe often threw things at him in public. When she screamed and then

threw water at him, he replied, "Did I not predict that when Xanthippe thundered she would soon rain?" (D) When a student asked him whether he should marry, Socrates asked him what he hoped to achieve by it, and when he replied "Happiness," Socrates said, "Then marry. For if you get what you want you will be happy, and if you do not, you will be wise." (D)

(Of the 100 greatest philosophers, less than half have been married, and less than half of these happily married. Nor is there a single woman among the 100 most influential philosophers in history. This probably explains how easily philosophers can utter brilliant lunacies that so easily deceive other philosophers but would never deceive a wife.)

No one knows exactly how much of Plato's picture of Socrates is historically accurate and how much is Plato's idealization; but many other ancient sources corroborate, and none refute, the essential picture of Socrates that Plato gives us. It is very probably accurate because Plato wrote and circulated his Socratic dialogs within the lifetime of those who had known Socrates, so he could not have gotten away with great lies about Socrates among the Athenians who had known him, any more than the disciples of Jesus could have gotten away with a fundamentally false account of Jesus if this account, oral or written, circulated within the lifetime of those who had known him. That is why all "revisionist" accounts of Jesus depend on the idea that the Gospels were written generations later. The same would be true for Socrates.

Here is how Plato (who knew him best) describes his character, in the *Symposium*, in the words of Alcibiades:

I say, then, that he is exactly like . . . the little figures craftsmen make which you see sitting in the shops . . . they can be opened down the middle and folded back, and then they reveal inside of them images of gods. . . . When he is opened out—well, I don't know if anyone else has seen those images inside him, but I saw them, and thought them divine, and I had to do what he commanded. . . . When you listen to Socrates' talk it seems at first to be silly . . . donkeys and blacksmiths and shoemakers and tanners are what he talks about, and he always seems to be saying the same things and the same words, so that the ignorant and foolish would laugh at them; but when they are opened out and you get inside them, you find his words full of more sense than anyone else's, and the most godlike, and full of the best images of virtue, and reaching the farthest into what is the most profitable . . .

When I hear Pericles and other great speakers, I think them fine orators but I feel no confusion in my soul or regret for my passion-enslaved life. But this Socrates here has moved me to a state where I thought the life I was leading was not worth living. . . . For he compels me to admit that I am a fool in neglecting myself while attending to Athenian public business. . . . I am ashamed before him and before no one else, for I know in my conscience that I cannot refute him. . . . Sometimes I wish

he were no longer among the living. Yet if that should happen I know I would be even more distraught. I just don't know what to do with this man!

He doesn't care if someone is beautiful, or rich, or has any of the distinctions the public thinks are so great. He thinks of all these things as nothing . . .

On our military expedition to Poteidaiain . . . bearing hardships he exceeded not only me but everyone else. When we were cut off and had to go without food, as often happens on military campaigns, the others couldn't match him for endurance. Yet when there was plenty of good things, he was the only one who really enjoyed them. Especially drink. He didn't really like it, yet when he was compelled to drink he beat them all, and yet—wonder of wonders—no one in the world has ever seen Socrates drunk. . . . Once there was a terrible frost and no one would go outside, or if he did he would put layers of clothes on him and wrap his feet up in felt and sheepskin, but this man went out wearing only the same cloak he always wore, and marched barefoot over the ice more easily than the others who wore boots . . .

Once, he got some idea into his head and stood there on one spot thinking . . . he would not move. . . . At last when evening came some of the men brought out their pallets and slept near him (it was summer then) and watched him to see if he would stand all night. He did, until the sun rose, and then he offered a prayer to the sun and walked away . . .

When there was that battle for which the generals gave *me* the prize for courage, when not a single man would come to my rescue this man saved my life. I was wounded, but he would not leave me . . . but when the generals looked at my superior rank and wanted to give the prize to me, he was more eager than the generals that I should get it and not him.

You may wonder: If Socrates was really so saintly, why did he offend so many people? The question is naïve. We have always martyred our saints. If you don't understand that, you understand neither the nature of man nor the nature of a saint. The only socially safe lifestyle is to be neither remarkably good nor remarkably bad.

What was "the philosophy of Socrates?" Was it *only* "Lesson One," the wisdom that we have no wisdom? Almost, but not quite. There were some "Lesson Twos." Socrates often claimed to teach nothing, only to be a clarifying mirror, a kind of intellectual psychiatrist, showing others what *their* philosophy amounted to. Yet he unmistakably did believe and teach at least these ten things:

(1) The task of philosophy, and of life, is to **"know thyself,"** i.e. to know what the nature of humanity is and what the meaning and purpose of human life is. All other questions are trivial if not related to that, including the questions of physical science that occupied the attention of his predecessors. Anthropology (the philosophy of human nature), not cosmology (the philosophy of the physical cosmos), is the central issue, the key to philosophy.

(2) To know the human self, you must know its **telos,** its purpose, its end, its *summum bonum* or "greatest good." Ethics is the key to anthropology.

(3) This greatest good is not wealth, pleasure, power, fame, or honor but **virtue** (*arête*, "excellence"), which is not just good deeds but good character. Without that, even if you get A's in every subject, you flunk Life. Personal virtue is the key to ethics.

(4) This key to the good life resides in the soul. For **the true self is the soul**. This was a radical idea in Socrates' day, for the word for "soul" in pre-Socratic Greek (*psyche)* meant only "ghost," a pale, hardly-alive image of the real, substantial, living flesh and blood self. Socrates reversed the conventional relationship between body and soul: instead of the soul being a pale copy of the body, the body was a pale copy of the soul, which is more real, solid, substantial, and alive than the body. The fundamental task of life is the care of the soul. Socrates would have called Jesus' saying "what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" the most practical sentence ever spoken.

(5) In fact, the soul is so alive that it is impervious to death; **the soul is immortal**. The supreme proof of immortality is Socrates himself: even death does not change him. Read the death scene in the *Phaedo* and you will see that when the idea of death and the idea of Socrates thus meet in your mind, it is not the idea of Socrates but the idea of death that is changed.

(6) Because this was Socrates' answer to "know thyself"; because self = soul; therefore **"no evil can happen to a good man in this world or the next."** Good and evil do not happen, they are chosen. Others can harm my body but only I can harm my soul, by ignoring its true goods, which are wisdom and virtue.

(7) **The cause of evil is ignorance**, i.e. not knowing yourself, identifying the self with the body and its needs rather than the soul. We always seek the apparent good, but we do not always seek the true good; it is wisdom that discriminates the true good from the apparent good; thus it is wisdom that is the key to all virtues. We always seek happiness; if we only were wise enough to know that virtue is the key to happiness, and to let that knowledge rule our lives, we would always seek virtue too. If we don't, we are ignorant. Vice is ignorance—not of facts but of values.

(8) **Virtue can be taught**, not by lectures, either by God alone (in the "meno") or, if by men, but by self-questioning, by **Socratic method.**

(9) It can be taught because knowledge of true values is innate in us. We forget this innate knowledge, and need to be reminded of it, need to remember it. Thus **"learning is remembering."** The object of this remembering is not changing empirical facts but timeless values.

(10) Philosophy seeks the truth about these values by **defining** terms like 'Justice,' 'Soul,' 'Teaching,' 'Virtue,' 'Death,' 'Piety,' 'Courage,' 'Friendship,' 'Beauty,' 'Love,' 'Law,' or 'Pleasure' (each of which is treated in a different Platonic dialog) to get at the essences, the **essential natures** of such things. This is the foundation of Plato's "Theory of Forms" or "Ideas," which is the metaphysics behind Socrates' question "*What* is that?" That is a child's first question, and should also be the philosopher's. Socrates sought not just definitions of words but of realities, of the real natures or essences of things.

Most of these "essences" that Socrates sought were "values." For after all, man's two great quests must coincide, in the end: (1) the mind's objective, impersonal quest for truth, for true being, for the metaphysical ultimate, and (2) the will's subjective, personal quest for the good, for personal fulfillment, for the ethical ultimate. It was Plato who accomplished this in his identification of true Being with "the Good."

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24. Plato (427–347 B.C.)

Plato's uniqueness

Reading Plato is an experience like reading no other author.

(1) He is a literary genius.

(2) He is a psychological genius.

(3) He is a logical genius.

(4) He is a dramatic genius. It is impossible to remain an outside observer; he sucks you in to the dialog as a participant. No one makes you actively philosophize more effectively than Plato does.

(5) Most remarkably, he is amazingly inexhaustible and fresh. After 2400 years of fame, after being interpreted to death by everyone from college freshmen to major philosophers and everyone in between, after tens of thousands of books and articles about him, one would think the Platonic cow would dry up, but it gives genuinely fresh milk again and again. Plato most perfectly exemplifies the nature of a classic. Ordinary books are like milk bottles: after you drink the quart dry, it is empty. Classics are like cows. They are alive. They give fresh milk every morning, fresh insights every re-reading. The dialogs of Plato are the classics of the classics. They are to philosophy what the Bible is to religion.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, simply, "Plato *is* philosophy, and philosophy is Plato." Alfred North Whitehead said, "The safest characterization of the history of Western philosophy is that it is a series of footnotes to Plato."

Plato's dialogs are the earliest complete books of philosophy that we have. Yet not a single one of the thousands of later philosophical writers for 2400 years can compare with him as a writer and an introducer to philosophy. His dialogs are simply the most effective way of making beginners fall in love with philosophy that I have ever seen. As a teacher I have tried everything and Plato wins by a mile.

What does it mean to say that Plato's dialogs are *alive?* At least three things.

(1) They are not outdated antiques. Time has not touched them, as it has touched most other books. Their appeal today is as great as it was 2400 years ago.

(2) They have an effect on readers that only a living thing can have. They act on you, and you act on them. You are a participant, not a spectator. They *do things to you:* energize you, change you, challenge you, make you feel toward them as Socrates' contemporaries felt toward Socrates: perturbed, confused, distressed, and even sometimes angry, yet fascinated and attracted. (No, "attracted" is too weak; it's more like falling in love.) They make you feel deeply dissatisfied and also deeply satisfied.

(3) They are about real life, not just ideas. Some books are only full of words; others are only full of ideas, but Plato's dialogs are full of realities, full of life. (The word "logos" means all three things: word, idea, and intelligible reality, or truth.) They could be very successful stage plays or movies. They are dramas, both of ideas and of human personalities. Plato gives ideas arms and legs and eyes and mouths.

Plato can change your life. Aristotle tells of a farmer who read Plato's *Gorgias* and "at once gave up his farm, mortgaged his soul to Plato, and sowed and planted Plato's ideas there." This same dialog also changed Nietzsche's life, in the opposite direction: Nietzsche identified with that dialog's "villain," Callicles, rather than Socrates.

Plato's literary talent is universally admitted. No other philosopher has ever succeeded in writing such satisfying dialogs, though many have tried, e.g. Augustine, Malebranche, Berkeley, Schelling, Santayana, Valery.* For while other writers may have had *philosophical* talent, Plato had, in addition, the *literary* (poetic) and *psychological* (dramatic) talents that most philosophers lack. (Indeed, only a very few great philosophers are fascinating to read because of who they are as persons even if you are not interested in philosophy. Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard, James, and Nietzsche are the only names that leap to mind.)

It is an amazing coincidence that Socrates, the first and greatest of philosophers, who wrote nothing himself, should have as his student history's greatest philosophical writer and poet to write his dialogs. There has never been another Socrates, and there has never been another Plato. Their juxtaposition in time and place is an almost clumsily obvious piece of divine providence to anyone but an atheist.

Socrates was poor; Plato was rich. Socrates was ugly; Plato was handsome. He was probably a wrestler, with a broad ("platus" in Greek) forehead and/or shoulders, thus the nickname "Plato." His given name was Aristocles. But (according to D) he had a very weak voice. Socrates mingled with ordinary people; Plato was an aristocrat. Like Jesus and Buddha, Socrates never wrote a book or founded a school; Plato wrote 30 great dialogs and founded the world's first university, the "Academy." Everything "academic" takes its name from that school, which lasted for 900 years.

Unlike Socrates, who focused only on issues of individual morality, Plato was interested also in politics. His two longest dialogs, *Republic* and *Laws*, are both about the just state. He did not go into politics in his native Athens, but when invited by the absolute monarch, Dionysius, to come to Syracuse in Sicily to teach him philosophy so that he could institute some of the reforms proposed in his *Republic*, he accepted, and was notoriously unsuccessful, barely escaping with his life from palace intrigues. Plato himself tells us the details of this story in his "Seventh Letter," which could be called the world's first autobiography.

* Even the author of this book has published over a dozen of them, in which Socrates meets a variety of other thinkers such as Descartes, Hume, Kant, Machiavelli, Marx, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Freud, doctors, lawyers, psychologists, confused students, and even Jesus. But they are Little League games. Plato is The Show.

Plutarch tells us his first conversation with the king. He argued to Dionysius, as he did in the *Republic*, that virtue was the greatest good and that of all men the tyrant possessed the least of it; that justice is the only road to happiness, while tyranny is the road to misery. Dionysius replied, "You talk like a dotard." Plato replied, "You talk like a tyrant."

After his unsuccessful foray into actual politics, Plato returned to Athens and set up his Academy. There were other groups that tried to imitate Socrates and teach his art of logical cross-examination, but Plato's was the only one that survived. It was free and open to all, including women. Students were encouraged to disagree with each other and with Plato. (Contrast Pythagoras' school here.) Entrance exams were moral as well as intellectual; life had to match thought, practice match theory; for the whole point of philosophy is wisdom, and wisdom is moral as well as intellectual.

The curriculum of the school is described in book 7 of Plato's *Republic*. It became the "core curriculum" of Western education for the next 2000 years, known in the Middle Ages as the "quadrivium" (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music) and the "trivium" (grammar, rhetoric, and logic). (See Dorothy Sayers' famous essay "The Lost Tools of Learning," in which she argues strongly for the restoration of this old idea.)

The Dialogs

What are the dialogs of Plato about? Everything under the sun (and some things above it):

The *Apology* is a defense of Socrates, and of philosophy.

The *Crito* is about Socrates' refusal to disobey the law even to save his life.

The *Phaedo* is about death and immortality in general, and Socrates' death.

The *Charmides* is about temperance, or self-control, or moderation.

The *Lysis* is about friendship.

The *Laches* is about courage.

The *Euthyphro* is about religious piety and its relation to reason.

The *Lesser Hippias* is about whether it is better to do wrong intentionally or unintentionally.

The *Greater Hippias* is about the relation between goodness, pleasure, and beauty.

The *Ion* is about artistic inspiration compared with philosophical wisdom.

The *Gorgias* is about how to live, especially whether it is better to do wrong or to suffer wrong.

The *Protagoras* is about whether all evil is due to ignorance.

The *Meno* is about learning, which Plato says is really "remembering."

The *Euthydemus* is about the relation between thought and words.

The *Cratylus* is about the origin and nature of language.

The *Phaedrus* is about "Platonic love" and beauty, and the inferiority of books.

The *Symposium* is also about love and beauty, and the superiority of Socrates.

The *Republic* is about justice, and its "profit" in souls and states.

The *Theaetetus* is about knowledge transcending sense perception.

The *Parmenides* is about "The One," and whether plurality is an illusion.
The *Philebus* is about the relation between pleasure and wisdom.
The *Sophist* is about "the being of becoming (change)."
The *Statesman* is about (surprise!) the statesman.
The *Timaeus* is about the making of the universe.
The *Critias* (incomplete) is about the legend of Atlantis.
The *Laws* is a practical revision of the political aspects of the *Republic*.
Every bookcase (and every mind!) should have these dialogs in it.

The Significance of the Dialog Form

The dialog form is not accidental for Plato, for he saw the very essence of philosophizing as dialog: (1) within the soul, with yourself, (2) with other people, and (3) with the sought-for Truth above the self. Plato said (in the *Phaedrus*) that philosophy is not learned from books but only from live persons, who are not predictable like words on a page, but are like ad-lib actors in a lived drama. His dialogs give us the *process* of thinking as well as the conclusions; and we have to steer our own mind along each step of the winding road before we get to the destination. They deliberately discombobulate impatient, lazy minds. For, like Socrates, Plato wants to change not just your thoughts but your *way* of thinking. You have to take time with his dialogs. Since their end is always some truth that is timeless, it is fitting that the means to that end, the process of thinking, demands that you stop watching your watch.

Aristotle also wrote popular dialogs in the Socratic form, but all of them were lost, while all of Plato's (26 in all) were preserved. Scholars differ on how accurately they portray the historical Socrates, but most agree that the "early" dialogs (e.g. *Meno*) give us the actual conversations, or the actual kinds of conversations, that Socrates actually had; that the "middle" dialogs (e.g. the *Republic*) are Plato's more metaphysical speculations to ground Socrates' ethical interests; and that in the "later" dialogs the figure of Socrates recedes and eventually disappears. The borderline between Book 1 and Books 2–10 of the *Republic* is probably the borderline between Plato's early, Socratic writings, and later, Platonic writings. The differences between them are that in the former, but not in the latter,

(1) Socrates plays an active, lively personal role; he is not just a mouthpiece for Plato's ideas. His unique personality is upfront and unforgettable. (Socrates and Jesus are probably the two people in history whom it is the most impossible to confuse with anyone else.)

(2) He has active opponents, whose personalities are also portrayed with great dramatic skill, and who argue against him with great strength of will, if not of mind.

(3) The issue argued about is always the nature and definition of some moral virtue. Socrates was apparently not interested in either metaphysics or politics, as Plato was. He was really the first "Existentialist," while Plato was the first systematizer.

(4) And the dialog comes to few or no definitive conclusions. The reader is left to

pursue the question more fully himself—which is exactly what Plato did. Thus the later, Platonic dialogs do not betray Socrates' intention but fulfill it. (Though it is highly unlikely that Socrates would have agreed with all their details, especially the 'benevolent totalitarianism' of the *Republic*.)

Plato's whole work is a kind of *Apology* ("defense") of Socrates; it is the construction of a theoretical (metaphysical and epistemological) foundation under Socrates' practical (ethical and anthropological) philosophy. The ultimate question of practical philosophy is: What is the good? What is the good life? What is a good person? The ultimate question of theoretical philosophy is: What is Being? What is true reality? For Plato, these two quests must coincide; the answer to both must be the same. The ultimate reality, for Plato, is "The Good," or Goodness Itself, or "the 'Form' (essence) of The Good." This is Plato's "Big Idea," and we will take up most of our space in explaining this single idea, rather than trying to "cover" all his many other ideas; for Plato's philosophy, unlike many others, has just one single center to which everything else is subordinate, and this is it. It is also a fundamental dividing point for all subsequent philosophers. (See the author's *The Platonic Tradition*.)

Plato's "Theory of Forms"

To understand Plato's "Form of the Good," we must understand what Plato meant by a "Form." Plato's "Theory of Forms" (or as it is often misleadingly called, "Theory of Ideas") is probably the single most famous (or notorious) theory in the history of philosophy, and the heart and soul of Platonism.

"Idea" is a misleading English translation (of *eidos*) because it connotes something subjective, something in the mind. Ideas exist only in minds. But Plato's Forms exist *outside* minds. They are objective. They are the *objects* sought by thinking.

When we think of a pyramid, the object is material (it is made of stone), spatial (it is so many feet high), and temporal (it gradually changes and wears away). But what is the object when we think of a triangle? It is not a material object like a pyramid. Triangularity is not made of stone, nor does it have a size, nor does it change. The truths of geometry that describe it do not change. It is not part of "the universe" (the sum total of all material energy and things in space and time).

Nor is it a mere idea in our minds, for it cannot be false. It is simply itself. Our ideas can be false, they can be mere *opinions*. They are judged by whether they conform to their objects. Just as my idea that the Great Pyramid of Cheops is only four feet high is false because there is a real Great Pyramid that is much larger than that, and that objective reality is the standard for judging my subjective idea; so the idea that all triangles must have equal sides, or the idea that any of them can have more than 180 degrees in their three interior angles, is false because there is a real triangularity that is the standard for judging these opinions as false.

Also, our ideas, our opinions and beliefs, change, for they are in our minds, which change. Our minds are in time even though not in space or made of matter; and they

change just as material-spatial things change. But triangularity does not change. Our ideas of triangularity may change, but The Idea of Triangularity does not. So Ideas are not just ideas. They are Forms, natures, essences, "what's." *They are a third kind of reality besides matter and minds.*

Plato offered three kinds of arguments for their existence: (1) metaphysical, (2) epistemological, and (3) moral. Each of the arguments responds to the great debate in pre-Socratic philosophy between Parmenides and Heraclitus.

(1) The metaphysical argument is that true Being, as distinct from Becoming, is unchangeable, as Parmenides said (Being could change only into non-Being); but both the material world known by the senses and the world of our thoughts and opinions are changing, as Heraclitus said ("You can't step into the same river twice"). From these two premises it follows that true Being lies not in these two realms but in another.

(2) The two premises of the epistemological argument are similar: that true knowledge is of unchanging universal truths, as Parmenides maintained; but the world of the senses is composed of ever-changing particulars, as Heraclitus maintained. Therefore if there is true knowledge, it must be a contact with another world ("cosmos," "ordered reality"), another realm of objects. If the objects of true knowledge, as distinct from the objects of changing opinion, are unchanging and universal (like 2+2=4), while all the things in the material world that is the objects of the senses are changing particulars, it follows that the source of true knowledge is not the sensory world. So if knowledge is possible, there must be a non-sensory reality.

(3) The moral argument is that the world of Forms is necessary to account for ideals. We strive for as-yet-unrealized goals, such as perfect justice, beauty, happiness, or wisdom. These do not yet exist in the material world; that is why we strive for them. And they do not exist perfectly in our minds and wills either. The desire for them is there; but desire is not what we are striving for. But if they existed nowhere, they could not motivate our striving and acting. They must, then, exist beyond both our minds and our world, acting as "final causes," as Aristotle would call them: ends, or goals that causally act not by pushing but by pulling, so to speak, by drawing our will in their direction rather than in another direction. Since they do not exist in our minds or our world, and yet they cause our minds and our world to change in their direction, they must be real (because nothing unreal can cause anything) beyond these two "worlds" in their own third "world."

We mustn't think of this "third world" as "up in the sky somewhere," for that merely puts them into some mythical part of the "first world." Nor can we think of them as "in our minds" as mere concepts or desires because they *judge* our concepts as true or false and our desires as good or bad. They are the objects of our souls, our minds and desires.

Plato was not unaware of the problems and questions that this "Theory of Forms" raises; in fact he raised some of them himself in the later dialogs (especially the *Sophist* and the *Parmenides*). Nor did he ever claim to have attained adequate knowledge of the highest of all the Forms, "the Good." In the *Republic* he says that while the other Forms

such as Justice can be defined (that is what the *Republic* claims to do), "the Good" is infinite and therefore indefinable; and therefore we can only use analogies, parables, or myths; and even these show only the *way* to it.

The most famous of these parables, in fact the single most famous passage in the entire history of philosophy, is the haunting "parable of the Cave":

I said, "Take the following parable of education and ignorance as a picture of the condition of our nature. Imagine mankind as dwelling in an underground cave with a long entrance open to the light across the whole width of the cave; in this they have been from childhood, with necks and legs fettered, so they have to stay where they are. They cannot move their heads round because of the fetters, and they can only look forward, but light comes to them from fire burning behind them higher up at a distance. Between the fire and the prisoners is a road above their level, and along it imagine a low wall has been built, as puppet showmen have screens in front of their people over which they work their puppets."

"I see," he said.

"See then bearers carrying along this wall all sorts of articles which they hold projecting above the wall, statues of men and other living things, made of stone or wood and all kinds of stuff, some of the bearers speaking and some of them silent, as you might expect."

"What a remarkable image," he said, "and what remarkable prisoners!"

"Just like ourselves," I said. "For, first of all, tell me this: What do you think such people would have seen of themselves and each other except their shadows, which the fire cast on the opposite wall of the cave?"

"I don't see how they could see anything else," said he, "if they were compelled to keep their heads unmoving all their lives."

"Very well, what of the things being carried along? Would not this be the same?"

"Of course it would."

"Suppose the prisoners were able to talk together, don't you think that when they named the shadows which they saw passing they would believe they were naming things?"

"Necessarily."

"Then if their prison had an echo from the opposite wall, whenever one of the passing bearers uttered a sound, would they not suppose that the passing shadow must be making the sound? Don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do," he said.

"If so," said I, "such persons would certainly believe that there were no realities except those shadows of handmade things."

"So it must be," he said.

"Now consider," said I, "what their release would be like, and their cure from these fetters and their folly; let us imagine whether it might naturally be something like this. One might be released, and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round, and to walk and look towards the firelight; all this would hurt him, and he would be too much dazzled to see distinctly those things whose shadows he had seen before. What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he saw before was foolery, but now he saw more rightly, being a bit nearer reality and turned towards what was a little more real? What if he were shown each of the passing things and compelled by questions to answer what each one was? Don't you think he would be puzzled, and believe what he saw before was more true than what was shown to him now?"

"Far more," he said.

"Then suppose he were compelled to look towards the real light, it would hurt his eyes, and he would escape by turning them away to the things which he was able to look at, and these he would believe to be clearer than what was being shown to him."

"Just so," said he.

"Suppose now," said I, "that someone should drag him thence by force, up the rough ascent, the steep way up, and never stop until he could drag him out into the light of the sun, would he not be distressed and furious at being dragged; and when he came into the light, the brilliance would fill his eyes and he would not be able to see even one of the things now called real?"

"That he would not," said he, "all of a sudden."

"He would have to get used to it, surely, I think, if he is to see the things above. First he would most easily look at shadows, after that the images of mankind and the rest in water, lastly the things themselves. After this he would find it easier to survey by night the heavens themselves and all that is in them, gazing at the light of the stars and moon, rather than by day the sun and the sun's light."

"Of couse."

"Last of all, I suppose, the sun; he could look on the sun itself in his own place, and see what it is like, not reflections of it in water or as it appears in some alien setting"

"Necessarily," said he.

"And only after this he might reason about it, how this is he who provides seasons and years, and is set over all there is in the visible region, and he is in a manner the cause of all things which they saw."

"Yes, it is clear," said he, "that after all that, he would come to this last."

"Very good. Let him be reminded of his first habitation, and what was wisdom in that place, and of his fellow-prisoners there; don't you think he would bless himself for the change, and pity them?"

"Yes, indeed."

"And if there were honours and praises among them and prizes for the one who saw the passing things most sharply and remembered best which of them used to come before and which after and which together, and from these was best able to prophesy accordingly what was going to come—do you believe he would set his desire on that, and envy those who were honoured men or potentates among them? Would he not feel as Homer says, and heartily desire rather to be serf of some landless man on earth and to endure anything in the world rather than to opine as they did and to live in that way?"

"Yes indeed," said he, "he would rather accept anything rather than live like that."

"Then again," I said, "just consider, if such a one should go down again and sit on his old seat, would he not get his eyes full of darkness coming in suddenly out of the sun?"

"Very much so," said he.

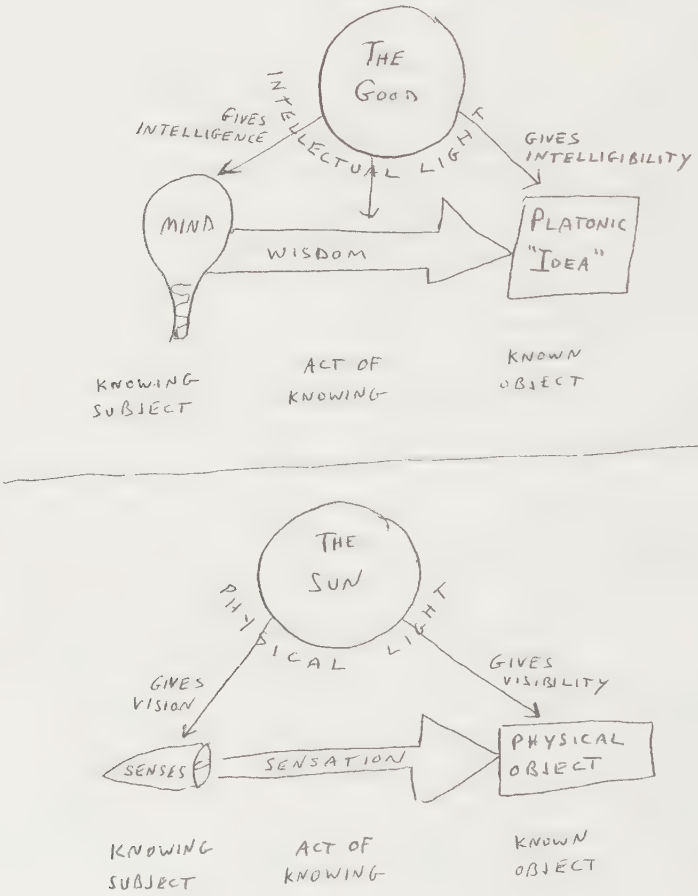
"And if he should have to compete with those who had been always prisoners, by laying down the law about those shadows while he was blinking before his eyes were settled down—and it would take a good long time to get used to things—wouldn't they all laugh at him and say he had spoiled his eyesight by going up there, and it was not worth while so much as to try to go up? And would they not kill anyone who tried to release them and take them up, if they could somehow lay hands on him and kill him?" (As they did to Socrates.)

The Cave summarizes four steps, or levels, in Plato's philosophy of education (learning), and thus the four levels in Plato's epistemology (philosophy of knowing), and thus

also the four levels in his metaphysics (philosophy of being), as follows, using the image of the four parts of a "divided line" for this four-step "stairway to the stars".

Epistemology	Metaphysics
4. philosophical wisdom, understanding	4. the Ideas (qualitative Forms)
3. logical & mathematical reasoning	3. mathematical (quantitative) Forms
2. first-hand sense experience	2. concrete individual things
1. second-hand sensing of images (perhaps also mental images, mere opinions, from "media")	1. images of concrete individual things

The ultimate reality, the "big Idea," the Idea of the Good, is not in one of these four categories, but is that which is pointed to, and gradually approached, by the four levels. The four are all finite and relative; the Idea of the Good is the one absolute, and is infinite. (The fact that Plato calls it "infinite" is a remarkable breakthrough, for the typical Greek mind did not consider infinity a perfection but an imperfection; for every work of art is perfect precisely by its limits.)



Thus the ultimate metaphysical reality is also the ultimate ethical reality. So the purpose of ethics, for Plato, is not only to rightly order our desires and our relations with each other; it is also to become more *real*. Goodness is not just human, it "goes all the way up" to ultimate reality.

Plato uses a third analogy in the *Republic* for the Idea of the Good, in addition to the Cave and the "Divided Line." It is the sun. As the sun makes everything visible, by physical light, this Idea makes everything intelligible by a kind of mental, spiritual light. For we understand a thing, in the last analysis, only when we know its value, what is is good for.

The Oneness of Ethics and Metaphysics

In all his dialogs, and most famously in his *Republic*, Plato offers an ethics that is an alternative to both that of the Sophists and the traditionalist populace (represented in the *Republic* by Thrasymachus and Cephalus respectively).

The *Republic* centers on the "four cardinal virtues" of justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation (self-control). It includes a foundation for these virtues in a psychology or anthropology of the soul's three powers: the intellect, the "spirited part" (roughly, the will), and the appetites (desires). These three faculties need the three virtues of wisdom, courage, and moderation, with justice as the overall harmony of the three. Justice is to the soul what health is to the body: the right functioning and cooperation of all the organs or powers.

Thus Plato proves that "justice is always more profitable (happifying) than injustice" (the fundamental conclusion of the *Republic*), both for individual souls and for states. For states are built both by and for human beings and therefore mirror the structures and virtues (or vices) of human souls. The structures and virtues and vices of souls and states are mirror images of each other.

Thus, for Plato, ethics must be dependent on anthropology, for the good for man (which is what ethics is about) must be dependent on the nature of man (which is what philosophical anthropology is about). You can't be a good self unless you know what a good self is, i.e. unless you "know thyself." Are we pieces of God, gods, images of God, angels in disguise, ghosts in machines, cyborgs, trousered apes, big-brained beasts, evolved slime pools, or mere chemical equations? Are we embodied souls? Or is Mind merely Brain?

But this (anthropology), in turn, is dependent on metaphysics, for what man is depends on *what is*. The most fundamental differences in ethics, like those between Socrates and the Sophists, are rooted in fundamental differences in metaphysics. "Goodness" and "Being," "values" and "facts," "what is" and "what ought to be," cannot be totally separated and independent of each other. To increase or decrease your goodness is to increase or decrease your being.

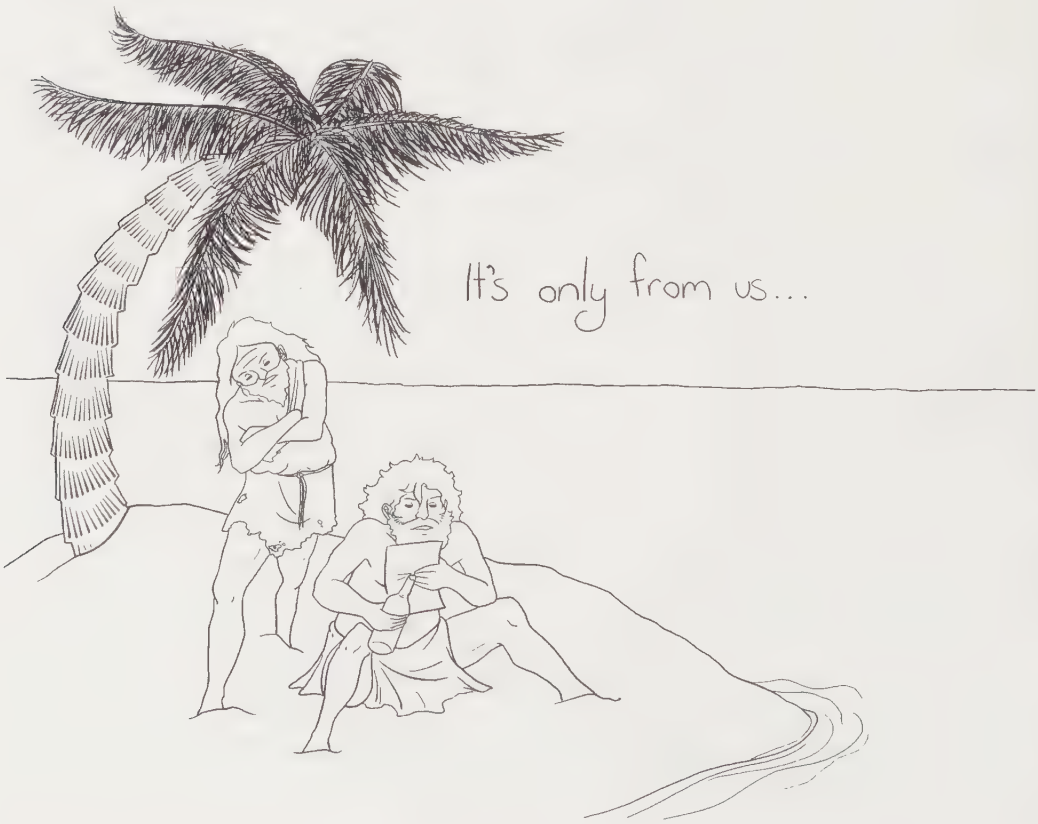
So in order to do ethics we must do metaphysics. We must ask questions like: Is Mind real? (Materialists answer No.) Is Matter real? (Immaterialists answer No.) Is Infinite Goodness real? (Atheists answer No.) Are "ideals" real? (Cynics and Machiavellian pragmatists answer No.) Plato answers Yes to all these questions. His answer is

controversial, defended by some, attacked by others. The issue is not a matter of absent-minded, head-in-the-clouds theory and academic speculation; it a matter of What Is Real and How We Should Live. The two great questions are aspects of a single question. No philosophical divide is more fundamental.

Thus the Sophists, both in Plato's time and in our own, charge that Plato's ethic is 'unrealistic'; that his ideals (The Good, Justice, Wisdom, Courage, Self-control) are really only *his* ideals, only subjective opinions. Plato wants to show that they are grounded in the nature of reality, that they "go all the way down" or, to change the image, "go all the way up": that they are objective, universal, necessary, and unchangeable. Only thus can they be true for all people, times, places, and cultures.

The View from the Cave: Who is the "Realist"?

If the prisoners in the Cave agree with the Sophists' ethical relativism, it is because they agree with their metaphysical Naturalism: that only Nature is real. ("Nature" here means matter plus human minds.) According to this popular view, reality is merely what we experience, without or within. In other words, the immaterial ideas we think and ideals we aspire to (truth and goodness) are only in our minds, only subjective, only within ourselves. We create ideas and ideals, we do not discover them.



If this is your metaphysics –"the metaphysics of the Cave" – then to be logically consistent your ethics must also be "the ethics of the Cave." If the only realities are the realities in the cave, then the only "real" goods are the goods in the Cave. The Cave is Nature, the realm of time-bound things. If there is no super-natural reality, there can be no super-natural good, no good that transcends time, space, and matter. And in that case Socrates is the unrealistic "idealist" and the Sophists are the "realists."

But for Plato it is Socrates who is the realist because he has gotten out of the cave and seen Reality. Plato wants to expand our metaphysics, and thus also our anthropology and our epistemology, to justify an expanded ethics. There really exist Forms as well as matter (in metaphysics), Soul as well as body (in anthropology), Reason as well as sensation (in epistemology); and therefore Virtue is more "realistic," more "real," than enlightened egotism (in ethics). Plato's "good news" is that There Is More; that we are fools who have denied our true identity and destiny by having crawled into the Cave and refused to come out of its comfortable shadows.

Plato does not deny that Nature is real, but he says it is like a picture, an "image" of what is more real; and that this "more real" reality is what the cave-dwellers think of as less real, as merely subjective ideas and ideals, which they think are only images or pictures of Nature and desires for natural goods. So *somebody* has everything inside out! Who is it? Is it Socrates or the Sophists?

The issue is fundamental for Plato. This is why most of his dialogs are arguments against the Sophists. (The *Gorgias* is the most fundamental, and a good place for readers of Plato to start.) How shall we choose sides? Is the choice arbitrary? Is the choice between objectivism and subjectivism of ideals itself merely subjective? To say so is to prejudice the issue, to decide the answer by the very wording of the question.

It is also to undercut the authority of all reason and argument, including the arguments for this materialism. If Reason is merely something subjective, merely the way my mind happens to work, and not the light from reality outside the Cave, why pay attention to it? If my brain is just a computer programmed by chance, why trust it?

We all assume that our sensations result from objective reality impinging on our sense organs. And Plato does not deny that. But he asks: Why do we assume that ideas and ideals are not from objective reality impinging on our rational mind? Why do we think they are just "made up," created rather than discovered? Do we not also experience the impinging on our minds of objective and unalterable truth, for instance in mathematics? We cannot change the objective fact that 2+2=4, only the languages we use to express it. Similarly, we cannot change what justice is, we cannot make it unjust to be fair and altruistic, or make it just to be unfair and selfish. We "bump up against," or discover rather than invent, both quantitative (in mathematics) and qualitative (in ethics) Forms with our mind just as we bump up against matter with our bodies.

We find three kinds of these forms: physical, mathematical, and moral. We can change black rocks but we cannot change blackness or rockiness. We can change the length of a table from 2 feet to 4 feet, but we cannot change twoness or fourness. And

we can change the laws of the state from unjust laws to just laws (e.g. by outlawing slavery), but we cannot change injustice into justice.

If we made up "our" physical, mathematical, and moral truths as we made up fictions like mermaids or artifices like languages, we could change them as we can change our mermaids or our languages. But we can't. Something real resists us. Something comes to us, not just from us, with authority over our minds, so that we can be right or wrong about it. These are Ideas, not ideas; they are hard, not soft; they hit our minds as rocks hit our heads.

The first two "worlds," the worlds of matter and minds inside the cave, both reflect the same "third world" of Forms outside the cave. My correct geometrical ideas of triangles (in "world" #2, my mind) and the triangular things I find or make (in "world" #1, the physical universe) by using these ideas (in "world" #2) both reflect the Form "Triangularity" in "world" #3. Both the red rose and my sight of it have Redness. Both the good act and my right judgment about it have Goodness. Horseness explains why my idea of a horse and the material horse correspond, why my mental idea can be true of the physical horse: because they reflect the same Form. If the Form of Horseness in my mind were not the same Form of Horseness in the horse, I would not know the horse as it really is.

This is not a "head in the clouds" issue of abstract theory; it has profound, life-changing ethical/moral implications. Plato's larger metaphysics allows a larger ethics, for it allows a Good or End for man that is more than this-worldly happiness, or satisfaction of personal desires, whether for myself or society. It makes room for a Good for man that is greater than man.

Thus it allows an *authoritative* ethic, what Kant will later call a "categorical imperative," rather than a merely utilitarian, instrumental, pragmatic ethic of "hypothetical imperatives." In other words something absolute, not merely relative. Man is no longer, as in Protagoras, "the measure of all things." The Good measures man, man does not measure the Good. And this humbling of man under the Good really exalts him; Platonic Man is a far greater thing than Sophistic Man. To put the philosophical point in different but analogous religious terms, man becomes taller when he bows his knees to pray.

This is why Plato can be a "countercultural" rebel, and justify his critique of the Establishment's regime in Athens in the "Republic": he sees a higher standard. Only a transcendentalist or supernaturalist or Platonist can justify rebellion against the established order and the powers that be because he has a higher standard by which to judge. Only a believer in a higher "natural law" can justify rebellion against human laws. If this "natural law" becomes traditional, only a traditionalist can be a rebel. For he has a higher, unchanging tradition with which to judge the lower, human, changing traditions. Only the eternal can judge the temporal, and only the objective can judge the subjective. The Good cannot judge us if it is only our fabrication. Sophists must logically be stick-in-the-mud conservatives. They have no higher law to justify rebellion.

But this ethical conversion requires a metaphysical conversion from ordinary "Cave" thinking to "Platonic" thinking; from thinking that (our) ideas are images of things to thinking that things are images of (the) Ideas. In this new way of thinking, the standard is neither our minds nor the visible world but the Forms. The "world" of Forms "outside the Cave" is the ideal and standard for both Nature and our ideas and desires. *Our* ideas are judged by *the* Ideas.

The easiest way to understand this conversion of thought is by putting it into theistic terms by putting Plato's Ideas into the Mind of God. (Plato did not do this, but Augustine, the greatest Christian Platonist, did.) Thus, as our ideas copy Nature, Nature copies God's Ideas, so that *our science* is thinking God's thoughts after him by reading *His art* (i.e. Nature). The easiest way to understand Plato is to Christianize him, to put his Ideas into the Mind of God, and then, having understood this, to de-Christianize him again (for he was, of course, not a Christian but a pagan): keep the Divine Ideas without the Divine Person. Now you have Plato.

Plato's Anthropology

Central to man is his knowledge of the Good. This knowledge is in the soul, not the body. Therefore Plato sees man's essence as the soul; not as a soul-and-body but as a soul *in* a body, a soul "imprisoned in" a body, limited by a body even while using a body. His argument for the soul's immortality in the *Republic* (Book 10) is that since soul and body are totally different things, like oil and water, the death of one does not cause the death of the other. Because for him souls are that "loose from" bodies, Plato calls Reincarnation "a likely story" in the *Meno*. For only if the body is not part of our essence, can we get a totally different body by Reincarnation and yet remain the same person. This "soul only" view sharply contrasts with the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim belief in the importance and goodness of the body, and immortality as including a resurrected body as well as an immortal soul.

Plato first clearly mapped the soul's three essential powers or faculties of (1) the mind, reason, or intellect, (2) the will (which he calls "the spirited part" and thinks of mainly as the ability to say No, or righteous indignation), and (3) the emotions (he calls them simply "appetites"); (Plato had a rather primitive, simple, and shallow view of these last two powers.) Nearly every system of psychology since Plato begins with and modifies this essential tripartite map—e.g. Freud's "super-ego," "ego," and "id." They are the basis for Plato's famous "four cardinal virtues," another idea which almost all of Western civilization has inherited from him: (1) prudence or wisdom, which perfects the mind, (2) fortitude or courage, which perfects the will, (3) moderation or self-control, which perfects the emotions, and (4) justice as the harmonious interaction of the other three, each doing its own proper work.

Plato's Epistemology

Since man is essentially the soul, knowledge is essentially intellectual rather than sensory. As Plato's metaphysics separates (1) universal, timeless, immaterial Ideas and (2) particular changing material things, and as his anthropology separates (1) soul and (2) body, so his epistemology separates and contrasts (1) rational, intellectual knowledge of these changeless universal Forms, which can be certain, and (2) sensory knowledge of changing material things, which cannot.

In the Platonic Academy, the university he founded (the world's first and longest-lasting university, which lasted until 529 A.D.), his successors eventually came to doubt the existence of the Platonic Forms, and this left no knowledge left at all in the sensory world, since the transcendent Forms were not immanent in the world (as Aristotle would later make them). This is why skepticism reigned in the Academy, and "academic" became a synonym for "skeptic" in the ancient world after Plato. E.g. St. Augustine's *Against the Academics* is a refutation of skepticism.

Plato's theory of teaching, learning and education centers around the idea that "learning is remembering" (*anamnesis*)—remembering the soul's innate but unconscious knowledge of the Forms. This is the presupposition behind Socratic questioning, for to ask a question is to assume that the other party knows the answer, or has access to it. (Of course anyone can use the Socratic method without believing in *anamnesis*.)

For Plato, teaching and learning presupposes and requires five things. (Plato never lists these five systematically, but we can see them in practice in each of his dialogs.)

(1) There is objective, universal, and changeless Truth to learn.

(2) The soul has access to it by its very nature, has at least hints or images or traces or seeds of it. All souls have "the equipment," native intelligence.

(3) By Socratic questioning the student can be led to the "aha!" experience of discovering these Ideas merely by thinking.

(4) The student must, however, admit his own ignorance to begin with.

(5) And he must passionately *love* the truth and be dissatisfied with his ignorance.

Four Options

Four options present themselves as "package deals" in ancient philosophy, each embracing a metaphysics, an anthropology, an epistemology, and an ethics:

Philosopher	*Metaphysics*	*Anthropology*	*Epistemolgy*	*Ethics: The End*
Parmenides	Only The One (Monism)	Pure Reason	Pure Reason.	Mystical Enlightenment
Plato	Ideas & Things (Dualism)	Soul & Body (Dualism)	Reason vs. Sensation	Wisdom
Aristotle	Substance = Form & Matter (hylomorphism)	Soul = form of body	Reason abstracts from. sensation (soft empiricism)	Virtue (Soul) & good fortune (body)
Sophists, Democritus, Epicureans	Materialism	Biologism	Sensation (hard empiricism)	Pleasure

Of the four options, Aristotle is the most commonsensical, as well as the most complete. Aristotle is essentially Plato revised, Plato's two "worlds" put together, Plato's Forms brought down to earth. Aristotle is the primary "footnote to Plato." He was in fact the prime pupil of Plato, as Plato was the prime pupil of Socrates. He is also to Western civilization what Confucius is to Chinese civilization: the default position, the touchstone of sanity. To him we now turn.

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Suggested dialogs to begin with: *Ion*, *Meno*, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*
Plato by Eric Voegelin
Discovering Plato by Alexander Koyre
The Republic of Plato by Alan Bloom

25. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.)

Coleridge said that "every man is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian." Alas, most of us little bastards nowadays are neither. But Coleridge has a point: Plato is the archetype of the radical, surprising philosopher who comes to a point—he has one "big Idea"—while Aristotle is the archetype of well-rounded common sense. Plato is Tarzan swinging on a vine to rescue Jane from crocodiles in one fell swoop, while Aristotle is the explorer carefully mapping every inch of the jungle. Plato's works are dramatic dialogs written for popular consumption, while Aristotle's are edited lecture notes kept in a research library. They are exciting to think but not to read; or rather they are exciting to read only because discovering *order* is exciting, in a deep, satisfying, purely intellectual way.

Aristotle's Life

Aristotle's life is naturally divided into four parts.

(1) His father was the court physician to the King of Macedonia (just north of Greece). His father died when he was young, and Aristotle went to Plato's Academy to study and stayed for 20 years as Plato's greatest student. Plato called him "the mind of the school." He wrote many popular dialogs in the Platonic style, but all of them are lost. During his lifetime he was not nearly as famous or popular as Plato.

(2) He left the Academy when Plato died in 347 B.C. and Plato's nephew Eudoxus, rather than Aristotle, became the head of the school. He set up his own school for a while in Assos (in northwest Turkey), then returned to Macedonia to tutor Alexander the Great, who would conquer the world with armies and Greek civilization.

(3) Later, Aristotle would return to Athens to found his own university (the Lyceum) and his own philosophical system, with the apologetic tribute to Plato: "Dear indeed is Plato but dearer still is truth." He was called the "peripatetic" (walker-around) because he would lecture while he and his pupils walked, since he believed that walking was good for philosophy because it stimulated the conscious reason, while lying down on one's back was good for poetry because it stimulated the imagination and what we now call the unconscious. (Freud found the same thing to be true, thus he had his patients lie down during psychoanalysis.)

The Lyceum was a scientific research university, complete with a zoo (with 500 species of animals supplied by Alexander from around the world), a laboratory (where 50 species were dissected), a research library (including constitutions from 158 city-states), a museum, and Aristotle's lecture notes, which were edited and collected by either Aristotle himself or his students (no one knows for sure) into the titles we now have. He

recorded detailed observations of marine life, discovering, e.g., that dolphins were mammals rather than fish, since they gave live birth.

He made many scientific errors (as was quite natural for a pioneer) as well as many important scientific discoveries. For instance:

He thought that the brain was not the organ of thinking but of refrigeration for the blood.

He thought the earth was the center of the universe (as nearly everyone did at the time). He did, however, teach that it was not flat but a sphere, as did many others after him, especially in the Middle Ages. The idea that all premoderns believed the superstition that the earth was flat is a modern superstition.

He thought there were crystal spheres, perfect circles in which all the heavenly bodies were embedded and rotated round the earth.

He did not believe empty space, or a vacuum, was possible (he said space is full of "aether").

He denied the possibility of atoms, as in Democritus.

He believed that the man, and not the woman, produced all the form (genetic determination) in reproduction.

He believed that heavy objects fell faster than light ones.

Most of these errors came about because he trusted to theory more than observation. Many medieval philosophers, on the false assumption of a necessary connection between his often-erroneous science and his common-sense philosophy, accepted both as a "package deal." Many modern philosophers reject both, on exactly the same false assumption. And if it is true that Aristotle often substituted philosophy for science, it is also true that many modern philosophers substitute science for philosophy.

(4) After Aristotle directed the Lyceum for 12 years, Alexander died in 323. Athens exploded with anti-Macedonian feeling and summoned Aristotle to appear in court to answer charges of "impiety" (shades of Socrates' ghost!). Unlike Socrates, Aristotle was too practical for martyrdom: he left Athens, explaining that "he would not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy." He died in Euboea the next year, 322.

When the great library of Alexandria was destroyed, many of Aristotle's books perished. In 80 B.C., Roman soldiers found a separate collection of his manuscripts in a pit in Turkey and brought them to Rome, where they were copied. When Rome fell and when the Greek schools were closed, scholars brought them to Syria, then Iraq and Iran, where Muslim philosophers discovered and translated them from Greek to Latin to Syriac to Arabic.

Diogenes Laertius says Aristotle wrote 445,270 lines. He lists 386 titles. The books recognized as Aristotle's today are compilations and anthologies edited by Andronicus of Rhodes, who organized 2000 pages of text (twice the amount we have from Plato) into ordered categories. Many of them were probably lecture notes from his students.

Later gossips say that he was either remarkably selfish or remarkably virtuous (he was probably very ordinary); that he had "a lisping voice . . . very thin legs . . . and small

eyes" or that he was very handsome; and that he invented such things as a pre-technological alarm clock ("When he went to bed he took a bronze ball in his hand and had a bronze dish below it, so that when the ball fell into the dish he would be awakened by the noise"). Heidegger, in a course on Aristotle, summarized the three things we know for certain about him: "He was born, he worked, he died."

The Ordering of All Knowledge

In the Middle Ages, each philosopher had a nickname. But Aristotle was known simply as "*The* Philosopher." He was also called "the master of those who know" because he was the master orderer, the outliner of all reality. The basic structure of that outline is as follows. Here is Aristotle's classification of the sciences ("science" in the broad, premodern sense of "rationally ordered knowledge"):

(Preliminary:) Instrumental knowledge
- A. Logic: using language for proof
- B. Rhetoric: using language for persuasion
- C. Poetics: using language for beauty

I. **Theoretical knowledge** (knowledge of the truth for its own sake)
- A. "Natural philosophy," or physics
  1. Chemistry
  2. Botany
  3. Zoology
  4. Anthropology
- B. Mathematics
- C. Metaphysics (the study of the universal laws of all reality)

II. **Practical knowledge** (knowledge for the sake of practice)
- A. Ethics
- B. Politics
- C. Economics

III. **Productive knowledge** (knowledge for producing, for making: "techne" or "know-how," from which we get the word "technology."

We seek knowledge for three reasons: truth, goodness, and beauty or utility. We think, act, and make. In other words, we seek knowledge

(I) for the knowledge itself. This is "theoretical" knowledge, from the Greek "theoria", which does *not* mean "uncertain, merely hypothetical" but "contemplative"; it is also called "speculative" knowledge from the Latin "speculum" which means "mirror."

(II) for its practical application in acting, in living. "Practical" does not mean only "useful" or "what works" or "what is a means to an end" but "for practice." The most

important question of ethics, in fact, is not about practical means but about the end: What is the final end or good of human life, to which everything else is a means?

(III) for its application in making or mending things, improving the material world around us, including our own bodies (medicine).

Our "techie" society ranks III the highest (we're certainly the best society in history at it), II next; and I last (we popularly call philosophy mere "theory" or speculation"); but Aristotle would say we have it exactly upside down. Practical knowledge should be more important to us than productive (technological) knowledge because it is closer to home: it perfects not our world but our lives. And for the same reason, theoretical knowledge should be ranked highest of all because it perfects our very essential selves, our souls, our minds: it expands our consciousness, not just our world or our behavior.

Logic

Aristotle discovered and formulated the basic rules of logic, in six books together entitled the *Organon* or "instrument." Until the 20th century, Aristotelian logic was the only deductive logic. Francis Bacon (17th century) and John Stuart Mill (19th century) added important advances in inductive logic. Modern symbolic logic is not so much an alternative to Aristotelian logic as an addition, a refined symbolization, a mathematicization, and a Nominalization (see Vol. II, page 109 on Nominalism) of parts of Aristotle's logic.

Aristotle's logic is perhaps the single most useful idea in the history of thought. For whatever we think about, we must think either logically or illogically about it. And whether we are seeking Heaven or hamburgers, we will much more likely get it if we think logically. i.e. clearly, truly, and reasonably.

These are the three things logic seeks: clarity, truth, and proof. For there are **three acts of the mind**, classified by Aristotle from a logical point of view:

(1) **conceiving** and understanding a concept, a term, a meaning (like "man" or "mortal"); this is not of itself either true or false;

(2) **judging** or predicating one concept of another in a declarative sentence or proposition (like "all men are mortal"); this is either true or false;

(3) **reasoning** from one or more propositions (premises, assumptions) to another (a conclusion); giving reasons (premises) for our beliefs (conclusions). This is done by either (a) **induction** (reasoning from many particular cases to a generalization—"he and he and she and she are mortal, therefore all are mortal" or (b) **deduction** (from a general principle to a particular conclusion: e.g. the syllogism "All men are mortal, and Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal"). Deduction yields certainty, induction only probability.

Deductive arguments thus have three check points to pass before they prove their conclusions true:

(1) Are the terms all clear and unambiguous?

(2) Are the premises all true?

(3) Is the logic valid? Does the conclusion logically follow from the premises? (Aristotle was the first to formulate the basic rules for deciding this.)

The Four Causes

Central to Aristotle's philosophy of nature, or physics, is his theory of the "four causes." Next to his logic, this is probably the single most useful idea in the history of human thought for understanding and classifying things—*any* things (e.g. for organizing term papers!).

There are only four kinds of questions anyone can ever ask about anything:

(1) What is it made of? What is its raw material, or contents? Aristotle called this **the "material cause."**

(2) What is it made into? What is its essential nature? Aristotle called this **the "formal cause."**

(3) What made it or changed it? Where did it come from? Aristotle called this the "**efficient cause**."

(4) Where is it going to? What is its (natural or artificial) end? Aristotle called this **the "final cause."**

For instance:

Thing or event	Material cause	Formal cause	Efficient cause	Final cause
draydle	clay	top	papa	child's play
desk	wood	desk	carpenter	to hold books, papers
chair	wood	chair	carpenter	to hold sitting persons
bust of Socrates	ivory	Socrates' face	sculptor	to remember Socrates
acorn	chemicals	oak seed	parent tree	mature tree
Socrates	animal body	rational soul	parents	wisdom
avalanche	9999 rocks	rock slide	gravity	ground
puppy	organs	poodle	parents	adult poodle
eating	food	ingestion	chewing	health
argument	premises	syllogism	mind	persuasion
virtue	habit	goodness	choice	happiness (perfection)
"Moby Dick"	words	novel	Melville	amusement & wisdom

The formal and material causes are the two *intrinsic* dimensions or aspects (we do not call them "causes" any more) and the efficient and final causes are the two *extrinsic* dimensions or aspects, of any thing or event. The word "cause" in Greek (*aition*) meant literally "responsibility for." It came from the law courts. A "cause" of x is anything that makes a difference to x, that makes it x rather than y, anything that accounts for and thus explains x. A full explanation of any x includes these four dimensions.

Aristotle arrived at this comprehensive idea by reading and learning from all his predecessors, Plato and the "pre-Socratics." As a result of this study Aristotle wrote the world's first history of philosophy, Book alpha of his *Metaphysics,* which showed that all previous philosophers had recognized no other causes than his four. It was obvious that these philosophers all gave many different answers, but Aristotle noted for the first time that they also were asking the same four questions:

Thales ("water"), Anaximander ("the indeterminate"), Anaximenes ("air"), Heraclitus ("fire"), Empedocles (the "four elements" earth, air, fire, and water), Anaxagoras ("seeds"), and Democritus ("atoms") had all asked "What is it *made of*"? This is the *material cause,* that out of which things come to be.

Pythagoras ("numbers"), Parmenides ("Being") and Plato (the "Forms") had asked "What *is* it? What is its essence, its essential nature? This is expressed in a definition, the thing Socrates was always after in his dialogs. This is the *formal cause.*

Empedocles ("love and hate") and Democritus (the motion of atoms) had asked "What moves or makes it?" This is the *efficient cause.*

Heraclitus ("Logos"), Anaxagoras ("Mind") and Plato ("The Good") had asked "What is its *design, purpose, or end*?" This is the *final cause.*

In his late dialog the *Timaeus* Plato had already brought together all four causes in his account of how the universe was formed: by a divine craftsman or "Demi-urge" (the efficient cause) imposing the Forms (the formal cause) on matter (which Plato identified with space and called the "Receptacle" of Forms) for the end of "The Good" (the final cause). Aristotle universalized and demythologized Plato's account.

The four causes can be applied to any subject. For instance, Aristotle's aesthetics and literary criticism classifies four dimensions of a good or bad narrative:

(1) Its efficient cause is its author expressing his idea.

(2) The material cause is the style, the actual words he uses.

(3) The formal cause is the story itself, the artistic point or truth of the narrative.

(4) The final cause is its effect on the audience.

Modern physical science does not deal with formal or final causes, for its "scientific method" (probably the single most important discovery in the entire history of science) gets its power from its narrow focus, like laser light: it deals only with measurable, quantifiable aspects of things, thus only with material and efficient causes. (In fact it does not even deal with material causes in Aristotle's sense, with *potentialities* for receiving form, for these are not empirically observable.)

Aristotle and his medieval followers often mistakenly tried to use formal and final causes in physical science, producing "fuzzy science." Modern philosophers, out of envy for the scientific method, often make the same mistake in reverse: refusing to use formal and final causes even in philosophy because these notions are not "scientific." Explaining gravity as love or computer cybernetics as personal human thought is bad science; but explaining love as merely gravity or personal human thought as merely computer cybernetics is bad philosophy.

Teleology (Final Causes)

The Greek word for "end" or "aim" or "purpose" is *telos*; thus the English word **"teleology"** means the "logos" of "telos," the science (explanation, reasoning) of ends. Teleology has a bad reputation in modern philosophy, and needs a defense.

The reason final causes are necessary is simple: both in nature and in human art, things move in determinate directions rather than randomly. They are generally predictable. There is a reason for everything (otherwise reality is simply unintelligible, and we had better abandon science as well as philosophy); therefore there must be a reason for this too, a reason for the fact that the efficient cause does not merely impose form on matter and make (or change) the form-matter compound (which Aristotle calls the "substance"), but it moves or changes it *in one determinate direction* rather than another.

The final cause is the most important of all because it is the cause of all the other causes. Only because the puppy is directed by its own nature to the end of becoming an adult dog does it, without thought or choice, get hungry, eat meat and grow. Only because the author wants to write a novel does he, by thought and choice, put pen to paper.

Partial explanations, without all four causes, are incomplete but perfectly valid. Aristotle would not be surprised that current biological science can successfully give a purely mechanical, material explanation of evolution by natural selection. He would say that such an explanation, while explaining the efficient mechanism of life's evolution, still leaves unexplained *why* life has evolved in this constant direction, toward increasing complexity and consciousness. The efficient cause shows us the car's engine but not the road map.

Aristotle's Solution to the Problem of Change: Hylomorphism

Aristotle defines nature in terms of change, as **"that whose principle [origin] of change is [at least partially] internal to itself."** Thus dogs, stars, and mouths are natural, while boats, wars, and pens are artificial, for they are made or manufactured by external agents.

Aristotle distinguishes four ways in which things change or happen: (1) by **nature** (e.g. being born), (2) by **art** (e.g. building a bridge), (3) by **violence**, against nature (e.g. arresting the fall of a stone), and (4) by **chance** (e.g. bumping into things).

The puzzle of change is: How can a thing change and yet remain itself? Heraclitus and Parmenides both said it could not; thus Heraclitus denied that things remained

themselves and Parmenides denied that things really changed. Plato solved the problem by distinguishing two worlds: the Forms, which retained their unchangeable identities, and changing material things. Aristotle brought Plato's two worlds together with his "**hylomorphism**" (literally, "matter-and-form-ism").

This is Aristotle's main difference from Plato, and main criticism of Plato: not the existence of the Forms but their "separation" (*chorismos*) from material and changing things, from Nature. The popular opposition between Plato and Aristotle as between idealist and realist, formalist and materialist, rationalist and. empiricist, mystic and scientist, is an oversimplification; the difference is more one of emphasis and method than content. As Augustine later took Plato's Ideas and gave them a new home, in the Mind of God, so Aristotle gave the Ideas a new home in the world of Nature. But both remained Platonists in the most basic sense: for both, the Platonic Forms or Ideas are not just ideas or ideals; they are real.

Potentiality and Actuality

Aristotle explains change by the composition of matter and form, which is also the composition of potency (potentiality) and act (actuality). So he also explains change as "**the actualization of potentiality**." Form and matter are the static aspects of change; actuality and potentiality are the dynamic aspects of change.

Aristotle's notion of change as the actualization of potentiality is really quite commonsensical, even though potentiality is not empirically observable. Only because there is potentiality in a thing, can it change. The only reason acorns grow into oak trees and tulip bulbs don't, the only reason human babies learn to talk and monkey babies don't, is that acorns and human babies already have those potentialites in them while tulip bulbs and monkey babies don't.

Potentiality comes from matter, actuality from form. Both words have changed their meaning. "**Form**" for Aristotle does not mean "external shape" but "internal essence, essential nature." It is visible to the intelligence, not the senses. And **"matter"** for Aristotle does not mean actual chemical elements, atoms or subatomic particles. These are already *formed*, into carbon or helium or electrons or *something*. "Matter" means something more like formless energy. It is potential rather than actual. You never see matter alone, without form. It is the principle (i.e. the source) of indeterminateness or indefiniteness in change. It is why the same piece of wood can be made into a desk *or* a chair. Matter is not a substance, a noun, an entity, but an adjective, an aspect, a principle.

And so is form (for Aristotle, though not for Plato). Form is the other principle, the limit of matter. But it is not just the *spatial* limit or *shape*; it is the specification of matter, the actualization of its potency to become this specific *kind* ("species") of thing (star, planet, chair, desk, rat, shrew).

Since everything in nature changes, everything in nature is composed of matter and form—except matter and form themselves.

Forms themselves do not change (redness is always redness), but *substances* change. (Here is another word that has changed its meaning. Aristotle means by **"substances"** not chemical elements or compounds but concrete things.) A tree, or a leaf, changes from green to red in the fall. Its matter gets new form. The tree is a substance and its color is an accident, so when it changes from green to red, its substance (which is composed of matter and substantial or essential form) gets a new accident, a new accidental form.

Prime Matter and Substantial Change

Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of change: **substantial (essential) change and accidental change.** Most changes are accidental: e.g. only in quality (e.g. color), quantity (e.g. size), place, time, activity, receptivity, or relationship to other things. But in birth (or rather conception) there is substantial change: a new substance comes into existence, a new organism from its parent organisms; and in death it goes out of existence. The birth and death, beginning and ending, of any thing are substantial changes. The number of substances (beings) in the universe changes when substantial change happens.

In the case of accidental change—e.g. a green leaf becoming red in the fall—the "hotel room" which the old guest (greenness) vacates and which the new guest (redness) enters is the substance (the leaf), which is composed of substantial (essential) form and matter (as well as many accidental forms). But when the leaf dies and becomes leaf mold, the "hotel room" from which the guest departs is not any actual, formed thing at all but matter, energy, or potentiality itself. This has no form or qualities: it is colorless, shapeless, tasteless, etc. (The only place you will find this kind of thing is in White Castle hamburgers.)

Prime matter (pure matter, mere matter, formless matter) does not exist alone but only as the potentiality for change from one essential form to another, e.g. from leaf to leaf mold. It makes the substantial changes of birth and death possible. Prime matter is the "substratum" (or enduring identity of the subject) for substantial change (birth or death), as the substance (e.g. a dog) is the "substratum" for accidental change (e.g. from puppy to adult, or dirty dog to clean dog). The substratum (dog) is like the hotel room, the old form (puppy, or dirty) is like the departing guest, while the new form (adult, or clean) is like the newly arriving guest in the room.

But the image of the hotel room is misleading for substantial change, since the "hotel room" (substratum) for substantial change is not any *thing* at all but matter (potentiality) as such, "prime matter." Unlike matter in the modern physical-chemical sense, this is not in principle observable by the senses, and therefore is not a possible object for physical science. Modern physical science rightly ignores it.

But modern science also rightly ignores, or abstracts from, such things as (1) the "I" or subject pole of consciousness, (2) love as a free choice (as distinct from animal lust), (3) the supernatural, (4) beauty, (5) holiness, (6) emotional qualities, (7) moral values, (8) life after death, (9) the fact that anything at all exists rather than nothing, and (10) a child's

affection for a dog. But that does not mean these things are unreal. Nor does science's rightful ignoring of the philosophical concept of prime matter mean that prime matter is unreal.

"Matter" means "potentiality" in Aristotle. Classical modern science does not use the non-empirical, metaphysical concept of matter as such, or "prime matter," or pure potentiality, only the empirical concept of quantitatively measurable material powers like kinetic energy or chemical bonding ability. But perhaps science does *not* totally ignore this Aristotelian concept; perhaps the concept of "energy" which is transformable into any form of matter *is* Aristotle's "prime matter."

Whether or not the philosophical concept of potentiality is necessary in modern science, it is certainly necessary in philosophy, for Aristotle, to explain substantial change. Parmenides denied the very existence of change because he did not have the concept of potentiality. Because he did not have the categories to explain the data (that things change), he denied the data. This is "rationalism" in the *worst* sense of the word. Aristotle's approach is "empiricism" in the *best* sense of the word. He begins by accepting the data and then deduces the categories necessary to explain it. The data here is substantial and accidental change. The categories needed to explain this data include potentiality.

Potentiality is neither actuality nor nothing. It is real, but not a real *thing*. For reality, for Aristotle, is not merely a zero-sum thing, "to be or not to be." And real change is also not a zero-sum thing, a simple either-or: one thing does not simply disappear and another simply appear. When A becomes B, A must have had in itself the potentiality to become B to begin with. That is why puppies can become dogs but not cats, why live cats can become dead cats but not stars, why stars can become Black Holes but not people, and why a sighted person can see the color purple but a blind person cannot. There are potentialities as well as actualities. And that means that things are more than what they appear to be. A has in it something more than the actuality of being A; it also has the potentiality for becoming B (and not C). There are more dimensions of reality than what we can see, perhaps even more than we can think. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio . . ."

Categories

"Substances" and "accidents" are the two basic kinds of reality or ways of being real, according to Aristotle. A "substance" is not a chemical "substance" like helium, and an "accident" is not a car wreck. An unplanned baby is a "substance" and not an "accident"! A "substance" is an individual being, an entity, expressed in language by a noun. It "stands-under" (the meaning of "sub-stans" in Latin) its accidents, i.e. its attributes, which Aristotle listed as (1) qualities, (2) quantities, (3) times, (4) places, (5) relations, (6) actions, (7) passions (receptions, or being-acted-upon), (8) postures (the order of its parts), and (9) possessions. These nine "accidents" are real, but never real in themselves, like a substance. They exist only "in" some substance, as attributes of the substance.

Aristotle distinguished "primary substance," or the primary meaning of "substance," which is a concrete individual thing like Socrates or Fido, and "secondary substance," or the secondary meaning of 'substance," which is the universal species like Man or Dog. This is just the reverse of Plato's ranking of these two things.

Aristotle's "categories" are natural, not artificial or man-made. Of course we can artificially and arbitrarily "categorize" anything we want in any way we want: e.g. we can categorize persons as men, women, children, and non-humans, or as Irish and non-Irish; or we can create categories like 'things I like,' 'things I hate,' and 'things I am indifferent to,' or even 'pink things' and 'non-pink things.' But Aristotle's "categories" are not inventions but discoveries. They are made by nature before they are made by our mind. They are not subjective but objective, not just in our minds but in reality. They are ten different ways anything can be real.

(They are not sacrosanct or final. They probably should be modified a bit: e.g. "relation" seems much more important, and "posture" and "possession" less important, than Aristotle thought. "Posture" and "possession" are two of many kinds of relation.)

So here is Aristotle's Outline of Everything:

I Nonbeing
II Being
  A Accidents (9 of them)
  B Substances
    1 Spiritual substances (gods, angels)
    2 Material substances
      a Non-living (inorganic minerals)
      b Living (organisms)
        (I) Plants (no sensations)
        (II) Animals (sensations)
          (A) Irrational animals (brutes)
          (B) Rational animals (humans)

Aristotle's Metaphysics

"Meta" is Greek for "beyond." But **"metaphysics"** does not study only non-physical things, it studies everything. It includes such principles as the law of non-contradiction (which is a principle of all reality, not just of our logical thinking about reality); how being can be both one and many; the difference between potentiality and actuality; and the difference between time and timelessness. The above sections on form and matter, substance and accident, potentiality and actuality, are about metaphysics. Metaphysics is "beyond" physics *in universality*.

There is a second, simpler account of the origin of the name: in the library of Alexandria Aristotle's untitled book on this subject was placed next to or beyond ("meta") the

book he called *Physics*. Aristotle did not call it "metaphysics." He called it "first philosophy."

Metaphysics includes (but is not limited to) thinking about God or gods. Here are some important conclusions Aristotle came to on this subject:

* Aristotle argued, by logical reasoning alone, without relying on any religious faith, that there must exist one supreme **First, Un-caused Cause** or **Un-moved Mover** for the entire universe of changing things. (Like most people, he called this being "God.") His argument is essentially the following:

* Aristotle uses the word "motion" for all change. What we call "motion," change in place, or locomotion, is only one kind of motion. *All motion is the actualizing of potentiality*.

* *Nothing can move [change] itself* because nothing not already actual can actualize itself. Nothing can give to another what it does not have itself.

* We perceive many *causal chains*. In some of them, the cause comes before the effect (e.g. parents causing children). In others, the cause and the effect are simultaneous (e.g. the book is held up by the desk—that is the effect—at the same time as the desk holds up the book—that is the cause). "Second" does not mean only "later in time" but "dependent," and "moved" means not only "moved through space in time" but "caused in any way."

* In both cases, *the effect is dependent on its cause*. Nothing can be the (efficient or final) cause of itself. Nothing can bring itself into being, because to do that it would have to exist before it began to exist.

* *Either there is or there is not a "first" efficient and/or final cause*)—that is, an unchanged changer, an unmoved mover, an uncaused cause—or there is not.

* *If there is not a "first [un-caused] cause," then there could not be second (caused) causes*, since nothing can cause itself (the second point above).

* *There are second [caused] causes.*

* *Therefore there is a First [uncaused] Cause*, an "Unmoved Mover," an unchanged, eternal being. It changes other beings but nothing changes it.

The chain of causes that we experience cannot begin in nothingness (and our tracing effects back to causes cannot terminate in nothingness), but it must begin in a First Cause, and thus our tracing of effects back to their causes has to terminate in it. This is like a first flick of the first domino if the causality is temporal, or a first ground that grounds everything else if the causality is simultaneous.

The argument can be put in another, simpler way: Everything that is in motion is moved by something else, and the universe as a whole is in motion, therefore the universe as a whole is moved by something else.

The series of causes may *progress* infinitely but our tracing causes back to *their* causes in the series cannot *regress* infinitely. Why isn't this like negative and positive numbers, where an infinite series is possible in either direction? Because causality is not like numbers; it is a one-way relationship, like time (past leads to future but future does

not lead to past). For (prior) causes do not depend on (subsequent) effects but (subsequent) effects do depend on (prior) causes. No matter how many cars there are in a train, without a locomotive (First Mover), no one car can move another car. A chain of dominoes can keep falling without ending, but it cannot fall without beginning.

Aristotle's **"God"** is a very thin slice of the God of religion. "Uncaused cause" is only one of many attributes of the God of religion. Aristotle deduced a few others, such as not being in matter or time, since God is purely actual, without potentiality—thus God transcends Nature, since Nature is the realm of time and matter. Aristotle also argued that God lacked no perfection and was therefore self-conscious. ("Thought thinking itself," he calls it.) But he did not try to prove, nor did he believe in, many of the other attributes of the God of religion. For instance, Aristotle's God does not create, love, perform miracles in, or even pay attention to, this inferior world or human life. (It's a "snob God." Contrast pantheism's "blob God.") It is essentially the God of deism.

In addition to the Uncaused Cause, Aristotle also deduced the existence of **intermediary spirits** below God and above man—the equivalent of angels. Most cultures have believed in something like angels, but Aristotle deduced them from his primitive astronomy as necessary to move the heavenly bodies. He knew that nothing moves itself, and the heavens move (apparently perpetually), so he deduced the existence of superhuman perpetual movers. He did not know that on earth it is atmospheric friction that slows everything down but in a vacuum or near-vacuum like outer space, motion, like rest, can be perpetual; that a satellite in stable orbit can move forever without anything moving it except gravity. In other words he knew only half of momentum: that a body at rests tends to remain at rest unless acted on by another body. He did not know the other half: that a body in motion tends to remain in motion unless acted on by another body.

Aristotle also argued that **the universe is eternal** along with God. He thought God moves the universe perpetually, not by a "push" but a "pull," not by efficient causality but by final causality, like a beautiful woman in the middle of a crowded ballroom moving all the men, like stars in a spiral galaxy, to move around her to get closer to her. (Of course this is only an analogy; the stars are not men in love. But it is a fitting analogy because both stars and men are teleological; both move toward natural ends, ends determined by their nature.)

Aristotle's **God is not infinite**, for Aristotle thought that an actual infinite would be an imperfection. (For Aristotle, "infinite" means 'indefinite.") In contrast, the God of Judaeo-Christian theology is infinite in definite perfections: infinitely wise, loving, powerful, etc.). Aristotle thought there were only *potentially* infinite things, like time, and numbers, which can be infinitely added or divided.

Aristotle's Anthropology

(1) Aristotle famously defined man as "a **rational animal**." "Animal" is man's genus (the aspect of his essence that he shares with other beings) and "rational" is his specific difference (the distinctive aspect of the essence). The rational soul and the animal body are not two *substances* but are the form and matter of the one substance man.

The soul is the form of the body, the body is the matter of the soul. Soul and body are two *dimensions* of man, as the meaning and the words are two dimensions of a book. Aristotle believed in what psychologists today call the "psychosomatic unity." We are neither ghosts nor machines nor ghosts in machines.

This anthropology is neither materialistic (all of us is matter) nor spiritualistic (the soul is the whole self and is a spirit, a separate substance, like an angel or a ghost or a god). This means, on the one hand, that the mind, as a power of the soul, is not simply the brain, or brain functioning, as materialists claim. But on the other hand it also means that the mind cannot (normally) work without the brain, any more than an author can normally communicate meaning without words. (This might, however, in principle leave room for mental telepathy, mystical experiences, or "out-of-body experiences" precisely because these are *not* normal or natural.)

(2) The single human soul has **three levels of powers ("faculties")**: the **vegetative** (nutrition and reproduction, shared even with plants), the **sensory** (sense perception and sensory appetites, shared with animals), and the **rational** (intellect and will, which are specifically human). But it is one and the same soul that has all these powers. The soul is not a little ghost haunting the body, or an immaterial puppeteer-spirit pulling the strings of its material body-puppet; it is the very life of the whole embodied person, on all three levels. Evidence for this is the fact that at death, when the body loses its soul, all the powers cease at once.

(3) Aristotle believed in free will, though he did not use that term. (He called it **"voluntariness."**) He did not reduce man to a complex robot or a clever ape. That is why he thought moral words, words of praise, blame, command, and advice, were meaningful. We do not blame the broken Coke machine, expect it to feel guilty, or send it to confession. We do not advise or educate animals; we train them. But we blame our criminals, advise our friends, and educate our children.

(4) Aristotle apparently did not believe in the **immortality** of the individual soul (his language is somewhat ambiguous on this point) but only of the species, the universal, "human nature." He says "all soul" (i.e. soul as such) is immortal because it is not a physical substance. But *your* soul is the form of your body, and when your body dies its form must die with it, according to Aristotle, since Aristotle, unlike Plato, denies the separate existence of Forms. He does, however, call active reason "the Godlike part of man." And gods are immortal.

Plato had no problem with the immortality of the soul because he believed in the separate existence of Forms. One's anthropology depends on one's metaphysics. But not necessarily in a simple way: Thomas Aquinas, much later, combined Plato's immortal soul with Aristotle's anthropology (soul = form of body) and metaphysics (hylomorphism). This is possible but not easy.

Aristotle's Epistemology

(1) Aristotle is a **"soft empiricist,"** or moderate empiricist. He believed that all human knowledge begins with sense perception, but is not limited to it, since the reason can abstract universal forms from the individual material substances presented to the senses, understand those forms, and make deductions from them.

This works in four steps. For instance, (I) With our senses we **see** many men die. (II) With our reason we x-ray these events, so to speak; we **abstract** the universal forms "human nature" and "mortality" from these material events, and make the universal judgment "man is mortal" or "all men are mortal" by induction, or "inductive abstraction," moving from many particulars to a single universal. (III) In this process, we **understand** this universal; we understand that mortality is not just an accident but necessary, an essential property of human nature, since it is inherent in man's animality, or animal body. (IV) Then we **reason** deductively: "All men are by nature mortal, I am a man, therefore I am by nature mortal." The conclusion is certain because it logically follows from premises that are certain, and the premises are certain because we understand that they are necessary, not accidental.

Compare Plato's "Divided Line" (p. 112). Aristotle's step I is Plato's level 2. Aristotle's step 2 is not in Plato because Plato does not need a theory of abstraction since he believes that the Forms are already abstract, separate from matter. Aristotle's step 3 is Plato's level 4. And Aristotle's step 4 is Plato's level 3.

(2) Our words thus reflect the concepts in our understanding, which in turn reflect the forms (natures, kinds, essences, or *whats*) in reality. The single Greek word **"logos"** means all three of these: (I) **word** (or language), (II) **thought** (or concept or reason), and (III) **form** (or intelligible essence). Thus what we express in our language (I) is our knowledge (II) of what things really are or are not (III). Many modern philosophers question this basic epistemological assumption as "naïve." (See Gorgias' denial of all three.) Perhaps it is naïve, but I would not myself accept an invitation to Thanksgiving dinner in the house of any philosopher who is not sure that he knows the real difference between the logos of a turkey and the logos of a tarantula.

(3) Aristotle defined **truth** simply as thinking and saying what is: "**if one says of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, he speaks the truth, but if he says of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, he does not speak the truth.**" What

a wonderfully simple answer to an apparently difficult but really very simple question! Philosophers don't get more commonsensical than that.

(4) Like Plato, Aristotle distinguishes knowledge from opinion, and **certainty** from probability. He refutes skepticism (the belief that certainty is impossible) by noting that even the skeptic cannot and does not doubt self-evident principles like the law of non-contradiction (x is not non-x) or "the whole is greater than the part." A famous argument of the skeptics was that only proof gives you certainty, but proof requires premises, and these premises also require proof, and thus more premises, ad infinitum. Aristotle pointed out that the regress is not infinite but stops at such self-evident principles that "prove themselves," so to speak. We *cannot* doubt that x=x. Aristotle said that this regress also stops at immediate external or internal sensations like seeing color or feeling pain, which we also cannot doubt that we are doing. (Compare Descartes' more universal doubt (chapter 55, Vol. III).)

(5) Aristotle's epistemology contrasts with Plato's because his metaphysics does the same. (One's epistemology always and necessarily depends on one's metaphysics as well as on one's anthropology.) Plato is not an empiricist but a rationalist. For Plato, the only role of the senses is to remind us to look at the innate Ideas embedded in our reason but forgotten. And there is no need for the abstraction of form from matter in Plato, as there is in Aristotle, because the Forms are already separate from matter in Plato, so we do not have to make them separate by the act of abstraction.

To understand **abstraction**, think of a hunter entering a jungle to capture a lion, tranquillize it, remove it from the jungle, and put it in a cage. The hunter is the mind, the jungle is the material world, the lion is the form, the removal is the abstracting, and the cage is the concept. For Plato, the lion is already in the cage.

The two different epistemologies also follow from two different anthropologies. For Plato, the rational soul is a substance on its own and acts on its own to know the Forms, which exist on their own. For Aristotle, the soul is the form of the body so it acts with the body to sense and to know forms that exist in matter, by abstracting them.

Aristotle's Ethics

(1) There are three fundamental ethical concepts that naturally occur to our minds, three doors through which we can enter the realm of ethics: the good, the right, and the ought. Modern thinkers tend to emphasize the last two, ancient and medieval thinkers the first. For "good" is an ontological term, a metaphysical term, while "right" is a legal term and "ought" is a psychological term. (Obligation in an inner feeling or experience.)

"Good" is the most basic term in ethics. For it is only because there is a real ethical (moral) good that there are real natural rights (for we have a right to what is good, not evil) and real natural moral laws (to define goods and evils); and it is only because there

is a real good that there are real obligations or personal duties (for we have obligations to do good and shun evil).

Premodern ethics is almost always based on metaphysics. And in premodern metaphysics, goodness is part of reality, not just thinking or willing; it is objective, not just subjective. Reality includes goodness; facts include values.

At the beginning of his classic *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines **"good" as "the object of desire,"** as truth is the object of knowledge.

When we desire something evil, that can be only because it appears as good (desirable) in some way, even though it may not really be. Thus the desired is not necessarily the same as the desirable. In other words, (subjective) **wants** are not the same as (objective) **needs**. Ethics studies what is really, not just apparently, good.

This means that **"facts" and "values"** are not mutually exclusive concepts, as they are in much modern ethical philosophy. Values (Aristotle spoke of "goods" rather than "values," as did all pre-modern thinkers) are a certain kind of facts. They are not empirical or scientific facts, but they are objectively real. Some things, like courage or spinach or friends, are really good for us while other things, like theft or cocaine or suicide, are really bad for us.

(2) Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of goods, **ends and means.** Ends are things desired for themselves, like pleasure, beauty, or understanding. Means are things desired only for the sake of other things, in order to attain other things. Examples of means are money, medicines, and cars, which are means to the things money can buy, health, and travelling. Some things, like health and food, are desired both as ends and means. Health is the end of medicine, but also a means to work and to sports. Food is an end of farming and a means to health.

Since many ends are also means to further ends, the question naturally arises, then: Is there one final end of everything we desire and do? If so, what is it? What is the end of ends, the greatest good (**the "summum bonum"**), the point and purpose and goal of human life? "What's it all about, Alfie?" "What is the meaning of life?"

(3) In one sense, the answer is easy. It's what everybody seeks as the end of everything else, and never as a means to anything else. It's **happiness**.

But the Greek word **"eudaimonia"** that Aristotle uses here means not just subjective satisfaction or contentment but objective perfection or blessedness. It is not just feeling good but being good. It is objectively real goodness, or well-being, and not merely the mental awareness of it and the felt pleasure of it, which are the effects of its real presence to us. Thus suffering, which can help us cultivate virtues like courage and wisdom, can be part of the happiness of "eudaimonia" even though it is not part of the happiness of mere contentment. And thus moral virtue, which not everyone (subjectively) *wants*, is still what everyone (objectively) *needs* in order to reach true happiness, or eudaimonia. You can't be really happy unless you're really good.

(4) Everyone seeks happiness as the end, for no one wants to be happy as a means to another end, while everyone seeks other things because they believe they will bring happiness as their end. So it's a "no-brainer" to call happiness the "summum bonum," the ultimate end.

But in another sense, the answer to the question of the "summum bonum" is *not* obvious or easy, for what constitutes happiness? What is happiness made of? Is it money, or the things money can buy, or power, or honor, or fame? No, for these are all external. Is it health or pleasure? These are internal but not distinctively human but common to animals too. Human happiness, says Aristotle, is **"activity of the soul according to virtue in a complete life."** It is something we *do*, first of all with our choices, so we are largely in control of it and responsible for it. It is primarily a matter of the soul, with its powers of mind and will; but it also requires sufficient bodily goods and time ("a complete life"), and these are not wholly under our control. So happiness is good moral habits (virtues) plus good luck. But the key ingredient is moral virtue. The main "lesson" of Aristotle's ethics is the same as that of Plato and your grandmother: *if ya wanna be happy, ya gotta be good.*

(5) **"Virtue"** ("arete") means not just any kind of goodness but "excellence" (excelling goodness) in *doing* something. For moral habits, that "something" is living a human life, doing and choosing to do good things. For intellectual habits, it's thinking. For habits of art, it's making.

A virtue is a good habit; a vice is a bad habit. A **habit** is a way of consistently acting so as to perform well your natural function, natural end or "final cause." Habits are produced by repeated acts and also, in turn, help to produce further acts. They are not unfree, passive ruts but active patterns of freely behaving. Not all free choices are fully conscious: when a young man gives an old woman his seat, he may do it out of habit rather than deliberate thought, but he is responsible for it because he has *chosen* to become the sensitive and kind sort of person who does that kind of thing.

To be "happy" in Aristotle's sense is to fulfill your human potentialities, to perfect your human nature. Aristotle's ethics is a "natural law" ethics; its principles are founded on human nature and its natural, inherent teleology (purpose, end, final cause), and its needs, what it needs to attain this end, especially friendship, knowledge, wisdom, and virtue. Virtues make up **character**. Aristotle's ethics focuses on character more than actions, laws, duties, or rights. It centers on becoming a good *person*.

(6) **How do we acquire virtue**, and its product, character? Not merely by teaching, as Plato taught ("to know the good is to do it"). Nor is it inborn, as Rousseau and Lao Tzu taught. Nor is it artificially imposed by external authorities contrary to our innate viciousness, as Machiavelli, Calvin, and Hobbes taught. Virtue is a habit and therefore it is acquired by **practice,** by repeated right choices and actions. It is neither part of human nature from the beginning nor is it against nature, but it makes up our **"second**

nature." We are neither innately virtuous nor innately vicious. That's why moral education is so important.

(7) Human virtue is **twofold: intellectual and moral;** for intellect and will are the two distinctively human powers. Intellectual virtues include understanding universal principles, reasoning inductively to them and deductively from them, and applying them wisely to particular concrete cases in practice. Moral virtues include Plato's four "cardinal virtues" of justice, practical wisdom, courage, and moderation or self-control, and many other lesser virtues such as modesty,"proper pride," generosity, and wit.

(8) The matter (content, raw material) of each virtue is physical actions and emotional passions. The form imposed on this matter to construct a virtue is always a "thus far and no further," a mean between two extremes of action or passion, both of which are vices. (This has come to be called **"the golden mean."**) For instance, courage is a mean between cowardice (too much fear) and foolhardiness (too little fear). Modesty is a mean between shyness (too much shame) and shamelessness. Righteous indignation is a mean between uncontrolled wrath and indifference. Proper pride is a mean between egotistic arrogance and undue (false) humility. Generosity is a mean between stinginess and prodigality. And so forth. Virtue is like art: the construction of a thing of beauty by imposing form on matter. The Greek word *kalon* means both "virtuous" and "beautiful"; it is often translated "fine" or "noble" or "praiseworthy." The Greeks thought of moral virtue and the arts as very similar; we moderns tend to think of them as opposites, even as natural enemies. We expect artists to be immoral and saints to be unartistic and "hokey." The alternative to this tragic split would seem to be one of the many things we can learn from our forgotten ancestors.

(9) The matter of virtue, **the passions**, are not evil, as the Stoics would later claim. Nor are the passions inherently good, as modern Romantics like Rousseau would claim. They are neutral, but they have the potentiality to become good when informed by virtue. They are like wild dogs that are to be perfected by taming. Unlike most animals, dogs are happier when tamed, when lifted up into the realm of human values and incorporated into a loving human family. A similar thing happens to the passions when they are tamed and trained by virtue.

(10) Of all human goods, Aristotle has the most to say about **friendship**. It is *necessary for happiness*. It is *superior to justice*, even for the state, for it is the prime creator of community, public as well as private.

Aristotle distinguishes **three kinds of friendship**, based on the three kinds of goods: friendships of pleasure ("I enjoy you"), of utility ("I need you"), and of virtue ("I admire you"). He says the first is typical of children, the second of old people, and the third of mature people (but maturity is not measured only in years).

The fact that these are the only three kinds of good means that there are only three good reasons for anyone to do anything: pleasure, utility, and virtue, or enjoyment, need, or morality. If it isn't delightful, necessary, or virtuous, forget it. Such typically Aristotelian common sense can wonderfully simplify your life!

(11) Aristotle speaks of one other form of happiness which he says is the most perfect and Godlike of all: the **contemplation** of eternal truth. But he says this is attainable only by a few special people and only for a short time. Something close to snobbery occasionally surfaces in Aristotle. The contrast with Socrates is striking. But perhaps Aristotle is speaking of mystical experience here, which can come to anyone, rather than intellectual contemplation, which is enjoyable only by intellectuals.

(12) Because Aristotle, unlike Plato, taught that material goods were a necessary part of happiness (even though not the primary part), and because these were often dependent on chance (thus they are called the "goods of fortune"), he ended up not knowing how to refute the pessimistic saying of Solon the sage: **"Call no man happy until he is dead."** For tragedy may strike tomorrow, as it did in *The Iliad* to King Priam of Troy, the Greek version of Job—in which case virtue alone is not sufficient for happiness. But because Aristotle did not believe in life after death, he could not call a man happy after he was dead either!

Aristotle at first seems more positive and optimistic about life than Plato: yet Plato, in the end, is the more optimistic about attaining happiness, in this life as well as the next. Perhaps he knew, from Socrates, a secret that Aristotle did not. For by Aristotle's standards, Socrates could not be perfectly happy, since he was poor, ugly, and misunderstood all his life and lost *all* the goods of fortune in the end when he was unjustly executed: wealth, health, honor, material pleasures, and life itself. Yet Socrates, like the saints and martyrs, was deeply happy, and one of the few things he ever claimed to know with certainty was that "no evil could possibly happen to a good man, in life or in death." What was his secret that went beyond Aristotle's common sense?

No philosopher is without blind spots or compromising faults. One of the reasons why most of the early Christian writers admired Plato more than Aristotle was a radical contradiction between Aristotle and Christ about the good man and the good life. For Christianity, charity is a virtue; for Aristotle too much of it can be a vice. When someone once blamed him for giving alms to a beggar, Aristotle defended himself by replying, "I did not pity the man but his condition." (Another version of the story has him saying: "I did not give to a man but to humanity.") He taught that "the great-souled man" should avoid lowering his thoughts to lesser things like slaves, children, or women and should take care to walk and talk always in a grave a serious way. The word "snob" comes to mind. According to Christianity, pride is a deadly sin and humility a foundational virtue; but Aristotle ranked pride among the virtues and humility among the vices! (Granted, he spoke only of "proper" pride and "undue" humility, but he did not speak of "improper" pride as a vice or "due" humility as a virtue.) I

may be wrong, but I can almost imagine Aristotle singing Sinatra's song "I Did It My Way" on his deathbed. For Christianity, that's the song they sing as they enter Hell.

Aristotle's Politics

(1) **"Man is by nature a political animal,"** says Aristotle. A man outside society is "either a beast or a god." For Aristotle, as for all pre-modern philosophers except the Sophists, politics, like language, is natural, not artificial, in essence; though different political regimes, like different languages, are invented by different cultures.

Most classical modern political philosophers deny this, with their "social contract theory" and their notion that "the state of nature" is different from "the state of civil society." This is true of both optimists and Romantics like Rousseau and cynics and pessimists like Machiavelli and Hobbes.

For Aristotle the family, the tribe (extended family or village) and the state are the three levels of natural community and the three steps of human social evolution.

(2) The basic political virtue is **justice**, which means **giving each his due** (his "just desserts"). There is a natural and universal justice as well as a legal, conventional justice that differs from one society to another; and the first justice is the standard for judging the second. Thus we can judge not just that some people and actions are unjust but also that some *societies* and some *laws* are unjust. There are standards of natural justice to judge the standards of conventional justice. (If not, the Nuremburg trials of the Nazi war criminals was a sham, for they were heroes by their culture's Nazi standards of justice.)

But friendship surpasses justice as a necessity for the good life politically as well as privately.

(3) What makes **a good state** is not the number of its rulers. Rule by one (monarchy), by a few (aristocracy), or by all citizens (democracy) can each be either a good or bad regime, dependent on whether it attains the end of the common good, the happiness (which is first of all a matter of the moral and intellectual virtue) of the people. *Any* regime that makes itself its own end rather than serving its people is a bad one. The main point is teleology again: a good government, whoever mans it, works for the right end, the welfare of its citizens; a bad one does not.

(4) Unlike Plato, Aristotle defended and actually preferred **democracy**, noting that as history progressed it became more popular and monarchy less so. It is the "least bad" regime, though also the least good. Monarchy, by contrast, can be the best but is often the worst, since "the corruption of the best is the worst."

(5) Size matters. Like Plato, Aristotle idealizes the small **city-state** ("polis"), where every citizen can know every other one, as the only true public community.

(6) Like Plato, Aristotle insisted on **education**, public as well as private, as the most important cause of good government. This meant especially moral education, for it is wisdom and goodness, not riches, power or freedom, or even merely factual knowledge, that makes men fit to rule. This moreal education included education in the arts, especially music (which Plato also prioritized in his "Republic" for a similar reason: its power to shape souls).

(7) Like all ancients except the Jews, Aristotle defended **slavery** as a natural and necessary institution, claiming that some men were born "slaves by nature."

(8) He also thought that **women**, though fully human, were by nature unfit for public rule, only household management.

After Aristotle

After Aristotle, no philosopher for 500 years, until Plotinus and Neoplatonism ("new Platonism"), had the ambition to try to conquer the whole world of philosophy (as Aristotle's pupil Alexander the Great conquered the whole world militarily) by creating a new all-encompassing system, starting with a metaphysics, as Plato and Aristotle did. When ancient classical civilization declined, first in Greece and then in Rome, philosophers turned away from these idealistic goals to the more modest one of arresting the decline of sanity and peace in themselves even though they could not arrest the decline in the world. Wonder and speculative ambition gave way to a kind of early version of pop psychology, a cultivation of personal peace of mind in an increasingly decadent world.

Four schools of philosophy continued in Athens, supported by the state, until the emperor Justinian, in a fit of Christian fundamentalism, closed all pagan schools in 529 A.D. They were the Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Epicurean schools (the Academy, the Lyceum, the Painted Porch, and the Garden). The latter two were the most popular of all, especially among ordinary people.

In addition to the four schools, there were also philosophical movements without official schools, such as Skepticism and Cynicism. Pythagoreanism also lived on as an influence in many places.

Selected Bibliography:

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26. Pyrrho (360–270 B.C.) and Skepticism

Pyrrho of Elis is considered the founder of Skepticism (sometimes called "Pyrrhonism"). Pyrrho became a skeptic while traveling the world with Alexander the Great. He studied under gurus in India and magi in Persia and observed a great diversity of lifestyles, beliefs, and justifications for them in different cultures; and he concluded that it was mere narrowness of mind, provincialism and dogmatism to say that your own was superior.

A later skeptic, Carneades (214–129 B.C.), offered the same argument in theoretical form, causing great commotion when he visited Rome and gave two public lectures, one in which he explained and justified the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle and a second in which he disproved everything he had said in the first.

Pyrrho's skepticism has two basic ideas:

(1) Nobody knows anything real, really. Certainty is impossible. We know only appearances, not reality; therefore no one can know which appearances really correspond to reality, as no one knows which photograph of a person is accurate if they cannot see the person. (This is a serious problem in modern epistemology, especially in Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant.) Therefore we should suspend judgment in all cases. There is always an equally good argument for both sides of every issue, even if the two sides logically contradict each other.

Especially, *value judgments* are uncertain. "Who knows what's good or evil?" No one. We have no knowledge but only opinions, and customs and laws that are based on them.

If we renounce all opinions, we will also renounce all desires, and thus never be frustrated in our desires. (This is essentially the point of Buddha's "four noble truths": see chapter 4.)

(2) The greatest good is *ataraxia*, inner peace and tranquility, the absence of worry and agitation. This is also called *apatheia* or apathy. It is attained by believing and practicing principle (1) above. So (1) is the means, and (2) is the end.

Pyrrho began as a painter and became a philosopher by studying the writings of Democritus and those followers of Socrates who were called the Megarians, who emphasized Socrates' "learned ignorance." (Every school of philosophy seems to have taken one point from Socrates and left the rest behind.)

Personally frustrated by his inability to determine which of the many schools of philosophy was correct, and realizing that they all contradicted each other, Pyrrho concluded that their common mistake was an uncritical dogmatism, an unproved assumption that true knowledge was possible for man.

He practiced the skepticism he preached by prefacing every assertion with "it seems," "it appears to me." "perhaps," or "apparently."

Apparently (i.e. according to later stories, which may be real or may be only apparent), his friends had to accompany him for protection wherever he went because he refused to protect himself by making assumptions like "That carriage will run over me" or "I will fall over that cliff" or "That dog will bite me" and to act on such assumptions. He lived until he was 90. Apparently, he had many friends.

Like Socrates, he wrote nothing, but his ideas are known through the book *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Sextus Empiricus, a Greek skeptic of the 3rd century A.D.

This whole chapter is, of course, nothing but an uncritical, naïve, dogmatic superstition if Pyrrho is right. In fact, so is this whole book. In fact, so is the whole world and everything in it. Including that philosophy. The serious point against universal skepticism is that it seems self-contradictory. There are many ways to put this point. For instance,

Universal skepticism is not universally skeptical: it is not skeptical of skepticism.

You have to draw a line in the sand somewhere, even if it is only a line between drawing lines and not drawing lines.

If all opinions are equal, what about the opinion that not all opinions are equal?

To refute the claim that reason can know certain truth, you are presupposing and using reason's claim to know *that* truth even in your act of reasoning.

If you only know probabilities, and therefore not certainties, is *that* only probable also, and therefore not certain?

If all truth is only subjective, is that truth only subjective too?

Must we be dogmatic about not being dogmatic?

Is relativism absolute?

These arguments are theoretical and logical. But the fundamental reason for skepticism was practical rather than theoretical: suspension of judgment was supposedly the means to tranquility of mind. But the fundamental reason *against* skepticism is also practical: how can we live without knowing what is true and what is not? Sextus Empiricus answers that we can live by appearances, since that is all we know. But we have a practical need, as well as a theoretical desire ("wonder") to *critique* appearances to judge them by truth, to distinguish those that are true (or real) from those that are not.

After Pyrrho, Carneades (ca. 214–129 B.C.) modified the skeptical claim and said we *can* know truth, but only with degrees of probability, never certainty. The problem with this probablism, of course, is the same as with simple skepticism: you can't measure degrees of probability except by a standard of certainty. If it's only probable that a given idea is only probable, then perhaps that idea is certain. How can it be certain that nothing is certain? And if it cannot be certain that nothing is certain, then there is an infinite regress: is it only probable that it's only probable that everything is only probable?

Skepticism produces a very conservative temperament, for there is no justification for change if we cannot know what is truer or what outcome is better. The happiness promised by skepticism is a rather low, pale, and boring one: merely suspending judgment. It is only the absence of unhappiness rather than the presence of happiness.

Unlike Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism, Skepticism did not

have its own separate school in the Hellenistic world. But when Plato's relative Arcesileus, who was a skeptic, inherited the Academy, "academic" became a synonym for "skeptic" for the next 200 years. Arcesileus had a standing offer to refute any argument any student would ever offer for any truth-claim at all.

The later Roman skeptic, Sextus Empiricus, listed four reasons for Skepticism:

(1) Each animal species has different sense organs, therefore physical things appear differently to different animals.

(2) Among humans, there are differences of opinion about everything. "**We shall have to believe either all men or some. But if we believe all, we shall be attempting the impossible and accepting contradictories; and if some, let us be told whose opinions we are to endorse.**"

(3) Every argument proves its conclusion only if its premises are true; but no argument proves its own premises. Whatever other argument is used to prove those premises, also has unproven premises. Thus there is infinite regress. (Cf. Aristotle's reply to this argument in his epistemology.)

(4) What *criterion* shall we decide to use for truth? "**If they shall say it is incapable of decision, they will be granting on the spot the propriety of suspension of judgment; while if they say it admits of decision, let them tell us what it is to be decided by, since we have no accepted criterion and do not even know, but are still inquiring, whether any criterion exists. Besides, in order to decide the dispute which has arisen about the criterion, we must possess an accepted criterion . . . all demonstration requires a demonstrated criterion, while the criterion requires a proved demonstration.**"

This problem of the criterion for truth will deeply occupy Augustine (chapter 36) and Descartes (chapter 58), many centuries later. Answering skepticism was the whole point of Descartes' new method.

How would you answer these 4 arguments?

Probably the most readable, attractive, and commonsensical skeptic, though not an original philosopher himself, was the Frenchman Montaigne (17th century). The most serious, important, and logical one was David Hume (18th century); see chapter 65.

27. Diogenes (412–323 B.C.) and Cynicism

Diogenes, his teacher Antisthenes, and his student Crates, are the three main Cynic philosophers. Diogenes was born in Sinope in 399 B.C., the year Socrates died, and he died in Corinth on the same day Alexander the Great died in Babylon. The Corinthians erected on his tomb a white marble pillar surmounted by a dog, since "Cynic" means, literally, "dog."

To the ancients, dogs were not cute, beloved pets but dirty scavengers. The Athenians gave Diogenes this name as an insult, because his lifestyle resembled a dog's. He actually lived with a pack of stray dogs. But he took the name as a compliment and a title. Like a dog, he lived by nature, not convention or law.

Unlike Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism (the four main schools of Greek philosophy in the ancient world), Cynicism had no school building or courses. It was only a school of thought and, above all, of life. The only philosopher the Cynics admired was Socrates, who also was poor, socially shocking, wrote nothing, and started no school. Antisthenes walked 5 miles every day to hear Socrates. (*Every* one of the many schools of ancient philosophy, except the Epicurean materialists, claimed to be true disciples of Socrates, as every one of the 20,000+ Christian denominations claims to be the true disciples of Christ.)

The philosophy of Cynicism is very simple. It is that life should be very simple. The philosophy consists essentially of two points, one positive, one negative. Positively, *virtue is the only good.* Negatively, all the things society prizes are worthless: money, property, comfort, power, pleasure, fame, glory, politics, even family. Diogenes lived this philosophy as a radical ascetic, naked and alone in a barrel and begging or stealing his food.

Since virtue is the only real good, the distinction between virtue and vice, good and evil, is the only real distinction. Therefore all other distinctions are vain: social conventions, economic classes, private and public, my property and yours, naked and clothed, Greek and barbarian. (Diogenes was the first to use the word "cosmopolitan," to call himself a citizen of the order ("polis") of the cosmos rather than his native land.)

We have no writings from Diogenes, probably because he produced none. His life was his philosophy. No philosopher more completely illustrates the axiom that "Actions speak louder than words." And no philosopher has more humorous anecdotes told about him than Diogenes. For instance:

Alexander the Great, hearing his fame, came to him to hear him. The following conversation ensued:

Alexander: "I am Alexander the Great."

Diogenes: "And I am Diogenes the dog."

Alexander: "What can I do for you?"

Diogenes: "You can get out of my sunlight."

Diogenes believed that all political patronage would compromise his freedom and integrity. Alexander respected that so much that he said, "If I were not Alexander, I would choose to be Diogenes."

When a man held forth about heavenly bodies, Diogenes asked him how many days it had been since he had been in heaven.

When Plato was giving a logic lesson in his university (the Academy), and gave, as an example of a correct non-essential definition, "Man is a two-legged animal without feathers," Diogenes plucked a chicken, threw it at Plato, and said to the class, "Behold Plato's man!" Plato corrected himself and added to the definition "with broad, flat nails." (He didn't know about penguins.)

Diogenes said, "Plato winces when I track dust across his rugs; he knows that I'm walking on his vanity."

When he saw a child drinking water from his cupped hands, he threw away his cup as a luxury.

He said "athletes are made mostly of beef and pork."

He criticized musicians for tuning their instruments but not their lives; linguists for knowing the wanderings and misfortunes of Ulysses but not their own; and orators who knew how to speak well but not live well.

To train his body to ignore pleasure and pain, he walked barefoot in the winter and rolled in hot sand during the summer.

When a disciple of Zeno claimed to disprove motion, Diogenes got up and walked away.

When people complained that he was an extremist, he replied that the teachers of singing had to sing louder than the students.

Invited to dinner by a rich man, he was insulted by one of the guests who threw bones at him, like a dog. His reply was to act the dog by lifting his leg and urinating on his host.

Asked why he disdained money, he replied, "Because it costs too much." Asked what good thing money could not buy, he replied, "Poverty."

Whenever anyone would compliment him, he would slap himself and say, "Shame on me. I must have done something wicked."

He would walk in the market place at noon with a lantern, searching, he said, for an honest man.

Asked his advice about getting married, he replied, "Marriage is too soon for a young man and too late for an old man."

He walked backward in the market place, attracting attention. Then he explained what he was doing: "Exactly what *you* are doing with your lives."

Asked "What is the difference between life and death?" he answered, "There is no

difference." Asked, "Why then don't you commit suicide?" he replied "Because there is no difference."

He used to urinate, defecate, and masturbate in public. He said there was nothing wrong with stealing from a temple, or eating human flesh. He advocated the abolition of the family and a community of wives and children. (All this made Michel Foucault fascinated with him 2300 years later.)

If philosophers had to change jobs, many would be unemployed, but Diogenes would be a popular standup comedian in late Rome or America.

28. Epicurus (342–270 B.C.) and Epicureanism (Hedonism)

The philosophers of the Hellenistic age (after Alexander the Great) produced no new systems of metaphysics as the philosophers of the previous, Hellenic, age had done, but concentrated on personal ethics and practical popular psychology, especially on the problem of how to avoid pain and fear, physical and mental trouble, in a troubled world. The first and simplest answer to this practical question was Epicureanism.

Epicureanism is a form of "hedonism"—derived from the Greek word *hedone,* pleasure, which the Epicureans declared to be the supreme good and the purpose of life. Aristippus of Cyrene (430–350 B.C.) was the first of the hedonist philosophers, who were also called Cyrenaics, after Aristippus' luxurious home town of Cyrene.

The modern word "epicure" means a connoisseur of good food, since Epicurus identified the good life with happiness, happiness with pleasure, and the greatest pleasure with "a good digestion." But Epicurus' hedonism was very different from the modern connotation of Hedonism as wild, uncontrolled pleasure-seeking; although pleasure was the only standard, and thus there could be no bad pleasures or good pains, Epicurus' hedonism called for a careful, prudent, rational assessment of pleasures and the self-discipline to reject present pleasures if they would cause future pains—in other words, "delayed gratification." Epicurus wrote, **"My body exalts in living delicately on bread and water and it rejects the pleasures of luxury, not in themselves but because of the trouble that follows upon them."** "Delicacy" can be as hedonistic as profligacy.

Hedonism entails subjectivism, since pleasures are subjective. If I say, "I feel pain," no one argues, "No, you feel pleasure." Thus for the hedonist, whatever feels good to any individual, is good—to that individual. This philosophy naturally blended well with the subjectivism and skepticism of the Sophists, typified by Protagoras' saying "Man [the individual]) is the measure of all things." It also blended in well with the Sophists' relativism about moral goodness. Epicurus wrote, **"There never was such a thing as absolute justice, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among people in various places and times, which provide against suffering or harm."**

Born on the island of Samos, Epicurus taught the materialist philosophy of Democritus (chapter 19). He wrote over 300 books (according to D) and founded a famous, popular and long-lasting school in Athens. The Roman writer Lucretius (1st century A.D.) popularized Epicurus' practical hedonism as well as Democritus' theoretical materialism (which naturally fit together) in his poetic classic "On the Nature of Things" (see chapter 20). It was a kind of ancient version of current scientists' dream of a "Theory of Everything" through empirical, quantitative science alone.

Epicureanism identified pleasure as the supreme good; but since many pleasures

bring pain (e.g. the unbridled lust for money, sex, power, or drink), the ideal was not primarily maximum pleasure but minimum pain and disturbance (*ataraxia*), both bodily and mental; or at least a quantitative preponderance of pleasure over pain. Though "**every pleasure is good," yet "not every pleasure is to be chosen**" because some bring more pains than they are worth.

The ideal of painless, untroubled pleasure is symbolized by Epicurus' walled garden, behind which he lived the life of a yuppie monk untroubled by the world outside. His "school," "the Garden," was known for pleasant living and socializing. Like the most "progressive" modern culture, it was shocking to the mores of its society by being very tolerant—both of a variety of sexual lifestyles (Epicurus' mistress was a prostitute) and of all races, genders, and social classes.

Epicurus identified the three greatest sources of trouble, fear, and pain as (1) death, (2) divine intervention, and (3) fate.

(1) His solution to the problem of death is a materialist metaphysics that denies the existence of a spiritual soul that can survive death. The two ways this eliminates the fear of death are, first, that there is no fear of punishment in an afterlife, and, second, that "**death is of no concern to us, since all good and evil lie in sensation, and sensation ends with death. . . . Death, the most dreaded of evils, is therefore of no concern to us since so long as we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we no longer exist. It [death] does not therefore concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not and the latter are no more**." (Can you find a logical fallacy in that argument?)

(2) His solution to the fear of divine intervention by the unpredictable and capricious Greek or Roman gods is that if the gods do not exist, they cannot intervene, and if they do exist, they must be supremely blessed (otherwise they are not gods), but to be supremely blessed is to be untroubled by anything, and therefore untroubled by our human troubles. For if they intervene in human troubles, they would share in our troubles. So the gods are irrelevant to us; either they do not exist or, like Rhett Butler, they just don't give a damn. (And therefore they do not damn us.) Lucretius later wrote, **"Epicurus saved mankind from religion."**

(Logically, then, since all religions claim to save mankind from something, *both* sides of the dispute about religion claim to be ways of salvation, and in that sense religions.)

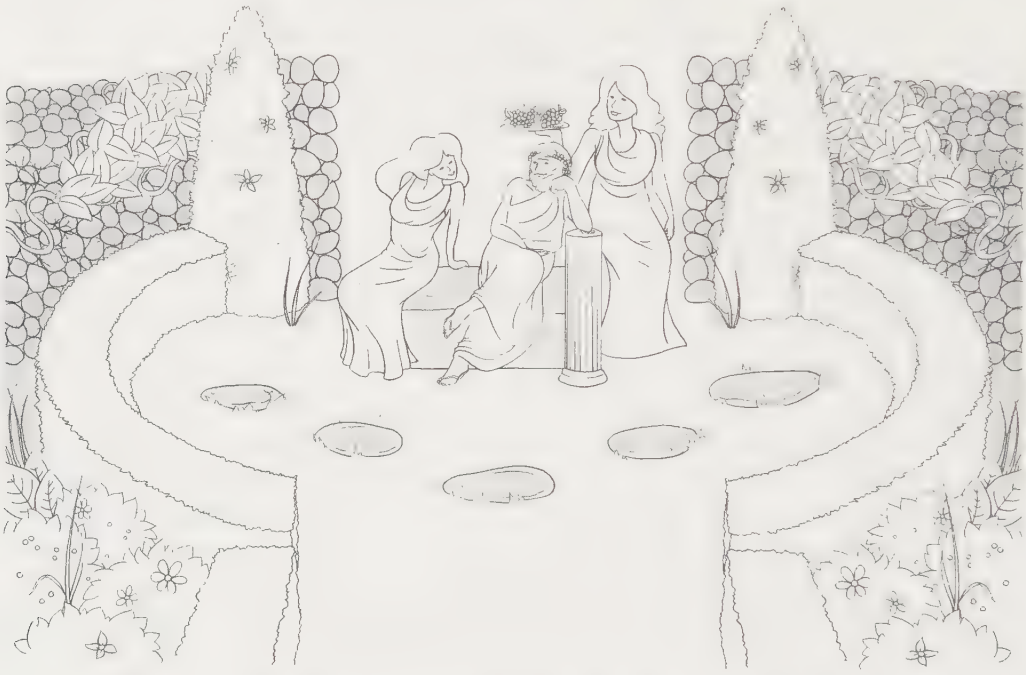
(3) Epicurus's Democritean materialism naturally led to determinism and fatalism. He wrote, **"The sum total of things was always such as it is now, and such as it will ever remain. For there is nothing into which it can change. For outside the sum of things there is nothing which could enter into it and bring about change."** Even souls and gods are made of matter and are merely parts of the material universe, small cogs in a great machine. There is no supernatural.

But Epicurus tried to make room for free choice in a materialistic and fatalistic world by noting that though Democritus said, rightly, that nothing exists but matter, in the form of atoms, yet these atoms may spontaneously deviate from their fated, straight course.

In other words, we have no spiritual free will, since there is no spiritual reality, but the atoms have a kind of material free will. Compare the Copenhagen interpretation of Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle. (Ask your professor.)

I can't help commenting that this looks like a double category confusion: first he conceives of persons as only impersonal atoms, then he conceives of atoms as if they were persons (things that have free will).

The obvious problem with Epicureanism is that it fails to account for, or to motivate anyone to pursue, a life of moral heroism. Even John Stuart Mill the 19th-century Utilitarian philosopher who was an atheist and a hedonist like Epicurus, argued against this lowering of the ideals. He famously said that "it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied." Like Socrates, he judged pleasures not just by their quantity or intensity (the only standard Epicurus used) but by their quality, by the higher standard of their relationship to truth and moral goodness, rather than vice versa.



The practical consequences of Epicureanism also seem self-refuting. For if everyone is out for their own "personal growth" or "self-fulfillment," they will feel free to walk out of duties and relationships (especially promise-keeping, parenting and marriage) which are necessary for the happiness of society as a whole and thus for all of its members. Empirical, scientific studies abundantly prove this last point. So socially as well as individually, there is "the hedonistic paradox" that the harder you try to be happy, the unhappier you become, like a hypochondriac who worries himself sick about getting sick. Massive experience teaches that happiness comes only as a byproduct of something higher, something self-forgetful and unselfish.

Logically, the point is that hedonism has no justification for altruism, or for condemning behavior that hurts others. Epicurus himself was careful to avoid all unpleasant relationships with people whose poverty, needs, or problems would disturb his tranquility.

Epicureanism also seems to deny the *data* of altruism, especially martyrdom. It explains even acts of self-sacrifice as hedonistic. One might naturally ask: What did Jesus get out of crucifixion, anyway?

29. Epictetus (50–130 A.D.) and Stoicism

Stoicism was the single most popular philosophy in the Hellenistic world. Its teachers included:

* a Greek philosopher (Zeno, its founder, about 334–265 or 340–262 B.C., who lectured on a "stoa" or porch—thus the term "Stoic"),

* an ex-slave to Emperor Nero's secretary (Epictetus, born 50–60 A.D.),

* a Roman patrician (Seneca, first century A.D.),

* an Emperor, Marcus Aurelius (second century A.D.), history's only example of a successful philosopher-king.

The essentials of Stoicism are most clearly and succinctly put in Epictetus. All the Stoics say pretty much the same thing. Unlike Platonism, Stoicism did not change and develop as a philosophy; there was no "Neo-Stoicism."

Following Socrates' example, Epictetus wrote nothing. His little classic the *Enchiridion* consists of notes taken down by his students. "Enchiridion" means "handbook," and this was literal: it was made into books the size of a human hand and pocket so that Roman soldiers could carry copies with them wherever they went, as Christian soldiers later carried the New Testament.

What we mean today by a "stoic" is pretty historically accurate: someone who "keeps a stiff upper lip," like an English schoolboy. (English public [i.e. private] schools' classical curriculum included Stoic philosophers.) He controls his emotions, endures pain and inconvenience without complaining, believes in fate, and takes moral virtue and honor very seriously.

Like all schools of ancient philosophy except Epicureanism, Stoicism begins with Socrates, concentrating on his conviction that the good, or happy, or blessed life cannot depend on factors outside ourselves.

Let's take it in steps.

(1) Stoicism is essentially a practical ethics, and its essential psychological foundation is what early modern psychologists called "the principle of apperception," which could be summarized in the maxim of Polonius in *Hamlet*, "*There is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so.*" In Epictetus' words, "**Men are disturbed not by things but by the view which we take of things.**"

For the mind is not a passive tablet onto which the world writes willy-nilly, but an active interpreter and judger of all experiences. Money, for instance, or power, does not automatically make you rich or strong. It can be a blessing or a curse, depending on whether it makes you proud or grateful, lazy or industrious, selfish or unselfish, greedy

or content, hard-hearted or sympathetic, responsible or irresponsible, happy or unhappy, personally enriched or impoverished. It all depends on your wisdom, judgment, attitude, and use. You are responsible for your own happiness or misery! Your attitude is always under your control, though your world is not.

(2) The *Enchiridion* begins with this principle: "**There are things which are within our power and there are things which are beyond our power. Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our power are body affairs.**"

Centuries later, Machiavelli would use the same distinction as his premise for a very different conclusion than Stoicism. He too divided everything in life into two categories, which he called "virtu" (power, what you can control) and "fortuna" (luck, chance, what you cannot control). He defined success as the maximization of "virtu" and the minimization of "fortuna." He applied this to external, material success, especially military and political, while the Stoics applied it to personal, inner, spiritual success.

Epictetus probably learned the distinction between the few things that are in our power and the many that are not from his life as a slave, where his very life was not his own. Once, as he was being tortured for another slave's mistake, he said, calmly, to his master, "If you continue to twist my leg, it will break." His angry master twisted and broke it. Epictetus replied, sweetly, "See? I told you so."

There are only three necessary virtues for the Stoic:

(I) the resignation to accept what cannot be changed,

(II) the courage to change what can be changed, and

(III) the wisdom to know the difference.

Stoicism is challenging. If we dare to honestly survey our lives, we must ask ourselves how much effort we waste fruitlessly fighting or worrying about external things that we cannot control (category I), or lazily and irresponsibly ignoring internal things that we can control (category II), or thoughtlessly confusing these two areas of life (category III).

(3) The result of this wisdom is inner freedom: "**If you take for your own only that which is your own and view what belongs to others just as it really is, then no one will ever compel you, no one will restrict you . . . you will do nothing against your will, no one will hurt you . . . nor will you suffer any harm.**" The Stoic hero is Socrates, who in his *Apology* declared this one of the very few things he was certain of: that "*it is impossible for a good man to be harmed by a bad one, either in this world or in the next.*" Socrates' argument for this striking conclusion is that a man *is* his soul (that was his answer to the oracle's command "know thyself"), and the physical harms that others can inflict on my body cannot harm my soul; only my own follies and vices can do that. In the words of Henly's famous poem "Invictus," "*I am the master of my fate/ I am the captain of my soul.*" "**External things touch not the soul,**" says Marcus Aurelius. **"If you**

wish to be a man of modesty and fidelity, who shall prevent you? . . . The judge perhaps will pass a sentence against you which he thinks formidable, but can he likewise make you receive it with shrinking?"

(4) Since the soul is not passive, but active, even the supreme passivity, death, changes its meaning when acted on by the soul's choice of attitudes toward it. In the words of Marcus Aurelius, "**Dying . . . is one of the acts of life—this act by which we die—it is sufficient then in this act also to do well what we have in hand.**" Thus Epictetus argues: "**Death is nothing terrible, else it would have appeared so to Socrates. But the terror consists in our notion of death, that it is terrible.**" We—the true self, the soul—are free even here, where we seem most unfree. We seem unfree only because we confuse ourselves with our bodies.

(5) Essential to Stoicism is the control of feelings by reason. Our feelings are free only insofar as they are subject to our reason, our mind; they are unfree insofar as they are subject to our bodies. To maximize freedom, Stoics minimize feelings. They often use the analogy of the turtle: as the turtle can draw his soft, sensitive and vulnerable limbs inside his hard, protective shell, we can draw our feelings inside our thoughts. Even today, a "Stoic" means someone who controls his feelings, especially painful feelings, by resolute will and rational thought.

The pronoun "his" here is significant: Stoicism, more than almost any other philosophy in history, is almost always a man's philosophy and never a woman's.

(6) The result, or "payoff," for the Stoic is peace of mind and serenity. Socrates was a stoical husband, serene with Xanthippe, the scolding shrew of a wife. He was not disturbed that he was so misunderstood, hated, and feared that he was executed. Since he did not seek any of the "gifts of fortune"—riches, fame, glory, honor, beauty, political power, or any material success—he was not disturbed by not having them. Only one thing was necessary, and that is under our control. (Compare Diogenes the Cynic's basic principle here, that "virtue is the only good.")

(7) Stoicism is an essentially practical, or "existential," philosophy, an ethic; but it has theoretical, metaphysical, and cosmological foundations. Its "life-view" is grounded in a "world-view." The essence of this world-view is the notion of **law**. The entire cosmos is ruled by law. Everything that happens is part of a single lawful order and design, and *each part is determined by the whole*, as in a work of art or a machine. Viewed cosmically, everything that happens is necessary and good, except human follies and vices. There are no such things as physical evils, only moral evils, and these are always attempts to violate the laws of human nature.

In fact, Stoics call the universal order of things "God." Thus they are pantheists (God is everything and everything is God). However, they usually conceive of "everything"

as material rather than spiritual (thus they are often materialists), and their "God" is not a spirit, much less a person, but an impersonal order or "logos" in all things. In the 17th century, Spinoza (chapter 57) would have a similar concept of God: that "God" and "nature" were the very same thing looked at from two different points of view.

(8) Stoics are cosmopolitans. (The word means "citizens of the cosmos.") Local, national and family loyalties and duties are subordinated to universal ones. The Stoics laid the foundations for universal human rights, international justice, and the critique of nationalism and racism.

(9) The Stoics were most famous for their morality. While Epicureans claimed that pleasure was the only good, Stoics claimed that pleasure was only a byproduct of the true good, as the pleasant taste of healthy food is a byproduct of the food. Pleasure itself does not keep you alive or healthy, any more than mere taste does. Stoics criticized Epicureans for seeking the byproduct rather than the product. Virtuous people will be happy, Stoics insisted, but only if they seek virtue rather than happiness.

Stoics tend to be conservatives, who accept and enjoy what has been dealt to them in the present rather than investing their happiness in a desired future. They look at the glass as half full, not half empty. This repudiation of the Epicureans' desire and demand for future pleasure, the Stoics argued, actually resulted in *more* pleasure in the present rather than less.

They argued, against the Epicureans, that if the good = pleasure, then the evil = pain and suffering; but this could not be true or else good men like Socrates would not have suffered. (They got this argument from Diogenes the Cynic.)

When asked why the gods, or the Logos, would make good men suffer, the Stoics answered that there must be a reason, and that there were visible analogies in life to what that invisible reason might be. For instance, wise rulers entrust the most difficult tasks to the most virtuous and courageous persons, especially in the army; and wise teachers give their best students the most difficult lessons.

The most famous Stoic philosopher of all time was not an ancient Greek but an 18th-century German, Immanuel Kant, whose ethic centered (a) subjectively on rational-moral "duty," which he defined as "respect for [moral] law" to the exclusion of external fortune, consequences, and natural inclinations (the sum of which was the desire for happiness), and (b) objectively on the rational "categorical imperative," whose three formulations were essentially (1) the Golden Rule ("do unto others what you will them to do to you"), (2) respect for all persons as ends rather than using them merely as means, and (3) personal autonomy and total responsibility. (See chapter 64)

Like Kant, the Stoics deduced, from the three premises (1) that personal virtue is the only thing that matters, and (2) that we are responsible only for what is under our control, and (3) that only our personal intention is directly under our control, the conclusion (4) that personal intention is the only thing that matters. Since the only good is virtue, the

only virtue is what you can control, and the only thing you can control is your attitude, your will's intention, it follows that the only virtue is a good intention. (5) And, as in Kant, the only good intention is the will to do your moral duty, to obey the moral law.

Stoics are always big on duty. But there is a logical problem with the Stoics' call to do your duty, for if all is subject to necessary law (the cosmic Logos), how can anyone ever violate moreal law? So why preach? As Aquinas argues, "Man has free will; otherwise all counsels, commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments are in vain.")

The essence of Buddha's philosophy, the "four noble truths" (chapter 4), is also essentially Stoicism, though with two important differences: Buddha (1) disbelieved in the existence of individual souls, egos, or wills, and (2) added a mystical foundation and end, namely "Nirvana." But like Buddha, Epictetus says: "**Remember that desire demands the attainment of that of which you are desirous . . . that he who fails of the object of his desire is disappointed . . . [therefore] altogether restrain desire; for if you desire any of the things not within your own power, you must necessarily be disappointed. . . . Demand not that events should happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen."** And like Epictetus, Buddha says: *"'These sons belong to me, this wealth belongs to me'—with such thoughts a fool is tormented. He himself does not belong to himself; how much less sons and wealth?"*

A great example of a sympathetic yet critical portrait of a Stoic character in modern fiction is "the Fox" in C.S. Lewis's historical novel *Till We Have Faces*. Good examples of living stoics are war heroes like John McCain and James Stockdale (who expressly credits his survival to Epictetus' *Enchiridion*), the paralyzed public figures like actor Christopher Reeve and physicist Stephen Hawking, and psychologist Viktor Frankl, whose classic *Man's Search for Meaning* derives Stoic (but also more-than-Stoic) lessons from the experience of Auschwitz.

Stoicism is a "mature" philosophy, not one for spoiled brats. The older one gets, the wiser Stoicism seems, while Epicureanism, by contrast, seems increasingly shallow and external. Stoicism's essential lesson is that happiness is always internal, and no amount of external goods can in fact make us deeply happy. Their essential argument is experience rather than logic.

Most people, independent of age, have a mixed reaction to Stoicism. To anyone but an Epicurean, there is something noble and admirable about it. It is uplifting; it raises the level of what it means to be human and gives us a high ideal to aspire to. Yet to anyone but a Stoic there is also something disturbingly inhuman about it. Each of its main "up" points has a "downside."

(1) If "there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so," then thinking cannot discover any *real* goods or evils, and morality must be merely subjective, even though it is universal and rational. This weakens morality rather than strengthening it.

It also destroys honest *personal sympathy* to believe that "there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so." Epictetus says: "**When you see anyone weeping for grief . . . be ready to say 'What hurts this man is not this occurrence itself—for another man might not be hurt by it—but the view he chooses to take of it . . . accommodate yourself to him and, if need be, groan with him, but take heed not to groan inwardly too.**" What a shocking lack of sympathy! The "groaner" needs your honest care and love and presence with him in his suffering; real groans, not pretended ones. Contrast Jesus' "groaning" at the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11).

(2) Epictetus says: "**If it concerns anything beyond our power, be prepared to say that it is nothing to you.**" This Stoic detachment from all that we cannot control sounds good—until we apply it to the sufferings and joys of other people. Indifference to *their* sufferings is more obviously bad than indifference to our own sufferings is good. It seems to treat others as pawns on our moral chessboard, means to our own perfection, rather than objects of our human love. No woman, and no happily married man, was ever a consistent Stoic. **"Be not elated by any excellence not your own"** (Epictetus) forbids us to rejoice at others' goods, even God's!

(3) "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul"—is that triumph or arrogance? "No evil can happen to a good man"—but evils *do* happen to my body. Is my body only a machine made of meat, and am I only a ghost that manipulates it? Am I only a pure spirit wrongly trapped in an alien body? Is that a healthy psychology?

(4) We can indeed always actively choose our attitudes; but are we not also inevitably passive to pain, disease, bad fortune, and death? Only God is pure act. Is That who we are?

(5) Control of selfish emotions by reason is a cardinal virtue (moderation or temperance or self-control), and almost the very definition of civilization. But not all emotions are selfish, and "control" can be cold and inhuman. Stoics seem like Mr. Spock in *Star Trek*: only half human.

(6) Stoic peace depends on the belief that everything is good, since it depends on the perfect Logos (rational law). Yet the failure to be a Stoic is *not* good by Stoic standards. If everything is good, so that evil is illusory, then that illusion itself is an evil. "Thus either there is evil to fear, or that very fear [of unreal evils] is evil." (St. Augustine)

(7) If everything is good because it is determined by Fate or the Logos, then my reason and will are also determined, so I cannot freely choose to accept or reject Stoicism. "Whatever will be, will be," so why do Stoics exhort, preach, moralize, or philosophize?

(8) Stoicism so emphasizes the acceptance of what we cannot change that it radically de-emphasizes what we can change, and minimizes hope, effort, and optimism. It is a philosophy for a passive, pessimistic age. Marcus Aurelius writes, "**Seek not to have things happen as you choose them, but rather choose that they should happen as they do.**" Was that a good philosophy for Jews under Hitler?

(9) Stoic acceptance makes sense for things superior to us—God, moral values, objective truth—but not for things inferior to us, material events in this world. A Stoic would tend to simply endure a disease rather than spend great effort to try to cure it.

(10). Stoic "cosmopolitanism" can be noble, but true cosmopolitanism is an extension of local loyalties. "Charity begins at home." Ignoring family and friends for strangers, prioritizing an abstraction like "mankind" or "Society" over concrete individual persons, is not a superior morality but an inferior one. It enables you to "love" mankind while despising or ignoring your neighbor. We are individuals first and have individual duties first. We are not responsible for the whole cosmos because we are not God. (Stoics tend to forget that rather obvious fact.)

(11) Most Stoics justified suicide on the grounds that the time and way one dies, as distinct from the fact that one is doomed to die, is one of the few things one could control. Are there not great things that we can but should not control?

Stoic epistemology, like all materialist epistemology, cannot account for our knowledge of universals. If all reality is material, all knowledge is empirical and therefore particular and concrete. Although our will can be active, our mind is passive for Stoicism, and can know only what experience delivers. Experience delivers only particulars. How then do Stoics know universals like law, duty, logos, fate, or the cosmos?

Comparing Stoicism and Epicureanism

In their metaphysics, Stoics and Epicureans are both usually *materialists* (everything is matter) and *monists* (all is one), though Epicureans are usually atheists while Stoics usually speak of "the divine." But both forms of materialistic monism, the atheistic and the religious, end up denying personal identity, for two reasons: their materialism (no souls or spirits) and their monism (no separate independent individuals). This will hold true in modern philosophy too, for both religious, Stoic-like monists like Spinoza and Hegel (who were *not* materialists) and atheistic, Epicurean-like materialists like Hume, who also denied any substantial self and mockingly spoke of self-consciousness as a "tiny perspiration of the brain."

As we will see when we get to modern philosophy, the "Enlightenment," which began with Descartes' one absolute certainty that "I think, therefore I am," ironically

culminated in the conclusion (in Hume) that we don't really exist! Stoicism and Epicureanism are too human and commonsensical to go that far, but for both, we don't really count. We are dust in the wind, lost in the cosmos among the atoms and fate.

Stoicism and Epicureanism have a common goal: peace of mind by detachment from the world's troubles. Epicurus withdrew into his walled garden, while Stoics withdrew into their own souls, even while one of them was ruling the world and fighting battles (Emperor Marcus Aurelius).

Stoics trust in the impersonal divine Logos, believing that all events are part of a perfect divine plan and that the wisdom of the Logos is accessible within everyone's soul. Marcus Aurelius writes, **"Look within. Within is the fountain of good."** This gives Stoicism a dignity, depth, and height that Epicurean materialism lacks. Yet the Epicurean is humble while the Stoic is proud. The Epicurean confuses man with an animal, while the Stoic confuses man with a god or an angel. These same two tendencies will reappear in modern philosophers: materialists (Machiavelli, Hobbes) vs. idealists (Spinoza, Leibnitz), empiricists (Bacon, Hume) vs. rationalists (Descartes, Hegel).

One might see cats as Stoics and dogs as Epicureans. Cats are clean and beautiful and noble, but aloof, even snobbish. They don't chew your shoes but they don't wag their tail wildly at you when you come home either. Dogs are dirty and messy, but they greet you with amazing love and pleasure.

The choice between Epicureans and Stoics is like the choice between slobs and snobs. Neither is ideal, but if pride is worse than lust and greed, then snobs are worse than slobs. It's remarkable how deeply even the secular post-Christian West has imbibed Christian values here. Stoics are more righteous, but also more self-righteous, than Epicureans, so that, paradoxically, they're farther from perfection because they're closer. Yogi Berra said, profoundly, that "If this world was perfect, it wouldn't be." Perhaps the same is true of people as the world.

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30. Seneca (4 B.C.–65 A.D.)

Roman Stoic philosopher, rhetorician, statesman, playwright (Shakespeare was influenced by his plays), and autobiographer, Seneca's philosophy is not original (it is classical Stoicism) or even terribly interesting, but his life is.

Raised by an aristocrat father, Seneca the Elder, he rose to become the greatest rhetorician in Rome. (Remember, rhetoric had the power in ancient Rome that a combination of political speechwriting, journalism, and media control would have today.) He became tutor, chief advisor, and "spin control speechwriter" for the emperor Nero. As one of his critics said, "while denouncing tyranny, he was making himself the teacher of a tyrant."

If there is one outstanding attribute that Seneca manifests, it would have to be hypocrisy. He preached republican virtue and self-restraint, then used his rhetoric to make the lawless tyrant Nero look like a merciful father. He preached Stoic poverty but accumulated enormous money, lands, power, and fame. Most remarkable of all, he candidly confessed his struggles with his hypocrisy and vices in his *Moral Letters*, which are strikingly similar to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, especially in their self-indulgence and rationalizations. His most famous quotation is "To err is human" (*Errare humanum est*). Shakespeare the Christian later added, "to forgive, divine."

In 39 A.D., the emperor Caligula became jealous of Seneca's reputation and plotted to poison him, but one of Caligula's mistresses talked him out of it, since Seneca was apparently dying anyway. Instead, it was Caligula that was dead in two years. The new emperor, Claudius, accused Seneca of adultery with his sister, and he was exiled to Corsica. After Claudius was also poisoned, probably by his niece and wife Agrippina, Nero became emperor at 17. Seneca had been recalled to tutor him from the age of 12, and later became his chief advisor. Seneca approved Nero's murder of his own son, yet composed an essay on mercy which he dedicated to Nero. He later collaborated with Nero in finishing Nero's botched murder of his own mother, then covered it up with superb PR work, fooling the Senate.

Eventually Nero had Seneca killed too. He allowed him the "dignity" of suicide, but it took painfully long for him to bleed to death after severing several veins. He then tried unsuccessfully to poison himself. He entered a warm bath to ease his pain but suffocated from the vapor.

His philosophy is unoriginal Stoicism, emphasizing ways to accept one's own mortality. The only three ideas of Seneca that seem new and worthy of discussion are (1) the claim (in *On Anger*) that anger is the worst of all the passions because it is the hardest to control, (2) the claim that gratitude is crucial to human relationships, and (3) the notion that the will is the master of the soul.

31. Marcus Aurelius (121–180 A.D.)

Marcus Aurelius' philosophy, like Seneca's, is not original or remarkable. What is remarkable about him, and what makes him one of the most famous and admired men who ever lived, is two things: his book and his life.

His book, the *Meditations* (literally, "to himself"), has been one of the most popular books in the world for over 1800 years. It is a practical and accessible compendium of practical Stoic wisdom. Many public figures have called it their favorite book, including former President Bill Clinton—though it is not clear whether it was Marcus' political power or his morality that attracted him most.

Here are some famous quotations from the book:

If you are pained by any external thing, it is not this thing that pains you but your own judgment about it. And it is in your power to abolish this judgment now.

Soon you will be ashes or bones, a mere name at best, and even that is only a sound, an echo. The things we desire in life are empty.

Take away opinion and no one will think himself wronged. If no one will think himself wronged, then there would be no more any such thing as wrong.

Look at the immensity of time before you and the time after you, another boundless expanse. In this infinity, what is the difference between one who lives three days and one who lives three generations?

When you wake in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and nasty. They are like this because they can't tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good and the ugliness of evil. And I have accepted that the evildoer has the same human nature as myself—not the same blood but the same mind. We both possess a share of the divine.

Even more remarkable is his life, and how he practiced what he preached. Here is history's only successful example of Plato's "philosopher-king." By temperament a philosopher, scholar, contemplative, and recluse, he was made emperor and was forced to live with action, chaos, war, calamity, conspiracy, deception, and publicity. He was surrounded by fools, flatterers, and would-be assassins. He was betrayed by his most trusted general, suffered the death of four of his five sons, and endured public rumors that his wife had many lovers. His Stoical philosophy enabled him to not only survive but to thrive. He lived as well as believed his own advice to himself: **Look within. Within is the fountain of good, and it will always bubble up if you will always dig.** He refused to fire his incompetent stepbrother who was his co-emperor, performing all the impereal duties himself. He persuaded the senate to pardon the general who had

betrayed him. He stood by his wife despite public rumors and his own soldiers' mocking of his manhood.

The average person's first and instinctive objection to Stoicism is that it is a set of high ideals that are impossible to live in the practical, hurly-burly world. Marcus Aurelius is the living refutation of that objection.

Not everyone admires him. Bertrand Russell called his philosophy "sour grapes," and summarized it this way: "*We can't be happy, but we can be good; let us therefore pretend that, so long as we are good, it doesn't matter being unhappy.*"

32. Cicero (106–43 B.C.)

Like Diogenes, Cicero is more famous for his life than for his thought. Yet his life was quite the opposite of Diogenes'.

He was a very well-known and well-loved Roman senator and lawyer as well as a political and moral philosopher. He is universally recognized as probably the greatest orator of all time and the greatest master of the Latin language. He translated and popularized Greek philosophy for the Romans and created a Latin philosophical vocabulary that would dominate philosophy for almost 2000 years. He especially admired Plato's ethical and political philosophy, though not his metaphysics.

During the chaotic first century B.C., when Rome was changing from a republic to an empire and a dictatorship under Julius Caesar, Cicero defended the old republicanism. He was not part of the conspiracy to assassinate Caesar in 44 B.C., but he was very happy about it. When Brutus lifted his bloodstained dagger, he called out, "Cicero, restore the Republic!" This made Cicero as well as Brutus an enemy of Mark Antony, who had him labeled an enemy of the state, exiled, and eventually assassinated as he was about to escape on a ship for Macedonia. Antony's wife Fulvia took Cicero's decapitated head, pulled out his tongue, and jabbed it again and again with a hairpin to take revenge against his speeches.

The name "Cicero" comes from the Latin word for chick pea ('cicer"). Plutarch (the late Roman who wrote *The Lives of the Great Philosophers*) says this came from the fact that his ancestor had a cleft in the tip of his nose that looked like a chick pea. The alternative explanation is simply that Cicero's family made their money by farming and selling chick peas.

Cicero's main influence on philosophy is his transmission of the Platonic and Aristotelian notion of a natural moral law. As a lawyer, Cicero deduced from this metaphysical premise the legal conclusion that all citizens had innate human *rights,* a concept not explicitly in Plato or Aristotle.

Like all Stoics, Cicero was a cosmopolitan. Here is his justification for universal moral law overarching and uniting not only all men but also men and gods (compare Socrates in Plato's *Euthyphro*): **Since reason exists in both men and God, it is the first possession common to both men and God. But those who have reason in common must also have *right* reason in common. And since right reason is** [moral] **law, we must believe that all men have law in common with the gods. Furthermore, those who share law must also share justice, and those who share justice are members of the same commonwealth.**

Cicero's political philosophy inspired the founding fathers of the U.S. John Adams wrote that "all the ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and

philosopher combined than Cicero." (He was thinking of his writings; personally, his letters show him to be vain, pompous, and arrogant—like many "great" statesmen in history.) Marx's ghost writer Engels called him "the most contemptible scoundrel in history" for upholding republican democracy but not class reforms.

His important works were frequently quoted from by other Roman authors, but none survive intact. They include *On the Republic. On the Laws, On the Orator, On the Ends of Good and evil, On the Nature of the gods, On Friendship, On Duties, and* the *Hortensius,* an introduction to philosophy that was universally praised but almost completely lost. It radically changed Augustine's life, made him a philosopher, and began his conversion to God, according to Augustine himself in his *Confessions.*

His most lasting and often-quoted work, especially in the Middle Ages, is "The Dream of Scipio," part of his *On the Republic,* which is Cicero's Stoic version of Plato's *Republic.* In it, the spirit of Scipio Africanus, hero of the Second Punic War, appears to his son and shows him the Logos of the universe and the place of morality and justice in it.

33. Plotinus (204–270 A.D.) and Neoplatonism

There have been three great syntheses in the history of philosophy. Plotinus claimed to have synthesized all the insights of all the previous ancient philosophers. Aquinas synthesized both the ancient and the medieval philosophers. And Hegel claimed to have done the same for *all* philosophers, though it is a safer claim to say that he did it for all *modern* philosophers.

Plotinus was the last great ancient philosopher. He was the founder of Neoplatonism, which claimed to be the faithful fulfillment of Platonism, though it moved in some very new directions than Plato's philosophy. It had a great influence on many early Christian theologians like Origen and Augustine, and on the whole of medieval thought. Plotinus explicitly repudiated Christianity, but his philosophy in many ways was similar to the Christian religion, and also in many ways very different from it.

The most important difference shows in the very first sentence of *The Life of Plotinus* written by his disciple Porphyry: "**Plotinus seemed ashamed of having a body**." Where Christianity's fundamental contrast was good vs. evil, Plotinus' fundamental contrast was spirit vs. matter. For Christianity, the most evil thing of all is a pure spirit, the Devil, while matter is God's creation and is *good.* And where Christianity was a "religion," whose ultimate end was a faith-hope-and-love "relationship" (almost the literal meaning of "religion") with a personal Creator-God, Neoplatonism was a "spirituality," whose ultimate end was a solitary escape from matter and the body, "**the flight of the alone to the Alone.**"

Like Shankara's Hinduism, Plotinus' philosophy is a Monism, centering on "the One." In fact, Plotinus longed to go east to India to study Hinduism, of which he had heard rumors in Alexandria, but instead went west and lived and taught in Italy.

Unlike Shankara, however, Plotinus is not a pantheist. ("Pan-theism" means that "God = everything and everything = God"; that there *is* nothing but God.). Plotinus is almost the polar opposite of this. In fact Plotinus' "One" (his absolute, a kind of impersonal God) is so totally transcendent and apart from everything that it is even "beyond being." It does not "exist" because it does not *partake of* existence or of anything else. "Being," or "existence," meant for Plotinus something manifold, not one: the many Platonic Ideas, essences, finite intelligible Forms.

But like Shankara, Plotinus was a man of one idea. "The One" is so totally one that it is in *no* way many. Therefore (1) it is not finite (for finite things have limits, edges, which distinguish these things from other things, thus they involve plurality). (2) It has no name (for all names distinguish). (3) It neither has any knowledge (since knowledge is a relation between *two* things, knower and known) nor can It be known as the object

of knowledge, because this again involves the dualism of knowing subject and known object, and also because only different finite objects can be intelligible, as "this" vs. "that." (4) It cannot even be said to *be* (see the previous paragraph). So The One "transcends" finitude, language, thought, and being. It is totally "mystical."

It is not the God of religion, for it is not a person, has no will, is not a Creator; and has no nature or character. (In theistic religions God, though infinite, has a character: infinitely *wise, just, merciful, loving,* etc.). Nor is it a Platonic Form, for the Forms are finite and intelligible. Yet Plotinus thought of himself as a faithful Platonist. He identified The One with Plato's "the Good" in the *Republic* and with "the Beautiful" in the *Symposium,* both of which Plato called infinite.

The One is not a being because it is the transcendent source and end of all beings, and of man. All being is an eternal and necessary emanation (not creation) from it and a movement back to it. Being is the cosmic drama of "exitus-redditus," exit and return, a kind of universal circulatory system with The One as its heart. The whole meaning of life is this "return" by detachment from body, matter, time, and finitude through the contemplation and love of The One. Plotinus identified this process with the "ladder of love" in Plato's *Symposium* and the ascent from the Cave through (and beyond) the Divided Line in the *Republic.*

In Plotinus' cosmic hierarchy, The One (level #1) emanates first The Intelligence (#2), which is a single eternal impersonal Mind in which are all the Platonic Ideas. Augustine would later teach something similar: that the cosmic home for Plato's Forms was the Logos, the Mind or Intelligence of God. But as a Christian Augustine identified this as a divine Person, who assumed human nature and matter in Christ (the "Incarnation"—a concept Plotinus found deeply repugnant).

From The One, through The Intelligence, comes next (by eternal necessity) The World-Soul (hierarchical level #3), which is the source of time and motion (and, in us, life and desire). As The One is eternal oneness and The Intelligence is eternal manyness (all the many Platonic Forms), The Soul is temporal manyness. At the level of The One, consciousness is mystical (beyond the subject-object dualism); it is intuitive at the level of the Intelligence, and it is discursive (logical) at the level of the Soul.

You could think of the three levels by the analogy of a movie as (1) single and simultaneous in its projector, as (2) manifold (many frames) but simultaneously present when unrolled in the projecting room, and as (3) *temporally* manifold when projected onto the screen, scene by scene.

Soul, both cosmically and individually (in man), has two aspects, or "faces," as Augustine would call them: it faces the Forms as transcending the body, and it faces the body in animating it. The same soul both thinks eternal truths and keeps your body alive. This bridges the gap between spirit and matter, and between eternity and time. Man is an amphibian, inhabiting two worlds.

This Soul fabricates a concrete material world (level #4) by imposing the Forms (level #2) on matter (level #5), which is the lowest, darkest, most unintelligible level

(since Form is the source of all intelligibility), and which is the source of all evil because it is the closest to non-being, or absolute nothingness (level #6). The meaning of life is to fly like Superman "up, up and away" from the separations and manyness of matter back toward The One (but not, like Superman, or the philosopher in Plato's parable of the Cave, back down again to fight and work and help poor mankind).

Bodies, made of matter, constitute the limit of The One's emanations, for matter itself is formless and unintelligible; it is almost nothing at all. It is also maximally plurified, dispersed through space, with parts outside of other parts. Since The One is The Good, and the source of all goodness, its opposite, matter, is the source of all evil.

The first three of Plotinus' levels may seem similar to the Christian Trinity, since (1) The One, like God the Father, is the source of all; (2) The Intelligence is the Logos that is like an eternal Word "from" The One and is cosmic Reason or Mind; and (3) The World-Soul is a "holy spirit" that moves in the world. But Plotinus' three (a) are not persons, (b) are not a single being, (c) and are not equal but hierarchical. And (d) the world is not freely created by, but necessarily emanated from, The One.

Plotinus explores the experience of this mystical ascent more than any other non-religious thinker. Unlike religious mysticism, it is not received by faith or given by divine grace, but it is a do-it-yourself intellectual ascent through self-purification. Its essential human prerequisite is not repentance, humility, faith, or charity, or a conforming of the will to God's will, but an introspective journey of the mind, "upward via inward;" a discovery of the center of the soul as something inherently Godlike; a purification not from sin but from body and matter, which is the source of all evil.

It is this experiential dimension of Plotinus, rather than the highly abstract philosophy, that has not lost its fascination down through the ages. The following excerpts should whet appetites and to flesh out what reading Plotinus feels like. The excerpts are from the treatise on Beauty, the only one out of the 81 treatises in the *Enneads* that was known to the Middle Ages. (*"Enneads"* means "nines;" there are 9x9=81 treatises.) Elmer O'Brien says, in *The Essential Plotinus,* "This, the earliest of the treatises, is an admirable introduction to all the rest. For centuries "Beauty" was the sole treatise by which Plotinus was known. But such is its quality that succeeding generations knew their Plotinus well in knowing only it."

"Clearly it [Beauty] is something detected at first glance, something that the soul—remembering—names, recognizes, gives welcome to, and, in a way, fuses with. When the soul falls in with ugliness, it shrinks back from it as disagreeable and alien. We therefore suggest that the soul, being what it is and related to the reality above it, is delighted when it sees any signs of kinship, anything that is akin to itself, takes its own to itself, and is stirred to new awareness of whence and what it really is."

"Seeing thus, one undergoes a joy, a wonder, a distress more deep than any other because here one touches truth. Such emotion all beauty must induce—an astonishment, a delicious wonderment, a longing, a love, a trembling that is all

delight. . . . All perceive it. Not all are stung sharply by it. Only they whom we call lovers ever are."

"Seeing, with what love and desire for union one is seized . . . all other loves than this he must despise, and all that once seemed fair he must disdain. Those who have witnessed the manifestations of divine or supernatural realities can never again feel the old delight in bodily beauty."

"The one who does not attain to it is life's unfortunate, not the one who has never seen beautiful colors or beautiful bodies or who has failed of power and of honors and of kingdoms. He is the true unfortunate who has not seen this beauty, and he alone. It were well to cast kingdoms aside and the domination of the entire earth and sea and sky if, by this spurning, one might attain this vision."

"He must not hanker after the graceful shapes that appear in bodies, but know them for copies, for shadows, and hasten away towards that which they bespeak."

"Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland. Here is sound counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For surely Odysseus is a parable for us here. . . . The Fatherland for us is there whence we have come. There is the Father. What is our course? What is to be the manner of our flight? Here is no journeying for the feet; feet bring us only from land to land. Nor is it for coach or ship to bear us off. We must close our eyes and invoke a new manner of seeing, a wakefulness that is the birthright of us all, though few put it to use."

"Only the mind's eye can contemplate this mighty beauty. But if it comes to contemplation purblind with vice, impure, weak, without the strength to look upon brilliant objects, it then sees nothing even if it is placed in the presence of an object that can be seen. For the eye must be adapted to what is to be seen, have some likeness to it . . . nor will any that is not beautiful look upon the beautiful. Let each one therefore become godlike and beautiful who would contemplate the divine and beautiful."

One need not be a disciple of Plotinus to be moved and inspired by his writings. He has two main kinds of critics: (1) skeptics, who ask how such mystical claims can be verified by non-mystics, and (2) Christians, like St. Augustine, who (a) point to the contradictions between Neoplatonism and Christianity mentioned above, especially the identification of evil with matter, and who (b) ask the simple question *how* we can climb this mystic ladder. Even if Plotinus' road map is true, a road map is not a car. Without divine grace, how can weak natural man attain this high, supernatural, superhuman end? The ladder is too long for us to be able to climb it without help.

That is the essential practical problem. Three more theoretical problems especially arise with Plotinus: freedom, evil, and plurality.

(1) If everything follows with necessity from the emanations of The One, how can we have the free choice between good (return to The One) and evil (sinking down into matter)?

(2) If bodies come from the last emanations from The One, which is The Good, how can they be evil? If, on the other hand, evil comes not from bodies but from nonbeing, how can evil be real?

(3) Why does the perfect, pure One produce imperfect multiplicities? It needs nothing. Is it bored with itself?

If you read Plotinus' *Enneads*, get Stephen MacKenna's poetic, exhilarating rather than literal translation. Don't try to master it; browse in it. Reading it is like watching a storm at sea: you are swept along by the waves.

Plotinus is the last great ancient pagan philosopher. The next era in philosophy, the medieval Christian, really begins a few centuries before the ancient era ends, when John the Evangelist equates Christ with the Platonic and Stoic Logos. What distinguishes medieval philosophy from ancient is not its dates, nor a new philosophical school, but a new religion. *All* medieval philosophers were Christians, Muslims, or Jews. *No* ancient philosophers were.

Selected Bibliography:

The Essential Plotinus ed. by Elmer O'Brien

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This is the first of a four-volume history of philosophy . . . on ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary philosophy. After the fourth volume is produced in paper, a one-volume clothbound edition, containing all four paperbound editions, will be published.

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Peter Kreeft teaches philosophy at Boston College and is a very prolific author of philosophy and theology texts, including, from St. Augustine's Press, *Socratic Logic, A Socratic Introduction to Plato's Republic, An Ocean Full of Angels, The Philosophy of Jesus, Jesus-Shock, The Sea Within, I Surf Therefore I Am, If Einstein Had Been a Surfer*, and the other three volumes of this series, *Socrates' Children: Medieval Philosophers, Socrates' Children: Modern Philosophers*, and *Socrates' Children: Contemporary Philosophers*.

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